Daylight, Inc.

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Daylight, Inc.

by DBMars

Summary

Have a problem with vampires? Call Daylight, Inc! We are Balitmore's number one vampire slaying operation, ready to clean up any UnDead mess. No infestation too big or too small. Got vampires? Give us a call!

Jack Crawford has assembled a team to fight the growing influence of vampires in North America, hidden in plain sight beneath a janitorial service. Bella is his government liaison. Jimmy is the receptionist. Zeller and Bev do vampire-fighting tech and science, and Bev's work has led to a discovery -- a serum that can give a human being vampiric strength, speed, and healing with none of the limitations (blood drinking, aversion to sunlight, all that jazz). The man selected to receive the serum and fight the UnDead is Will Graham, whose empathy pulse makes it impossible for him to be glamoured as well.

Last but not least, there's a rather unconventional team member -- Dr. Hannibal Lecter, ancient vampire, who has turned against his own kind. Well, he is a cannibal, after all. As in, he only drinks the blood of other vampires. And, in a tale as old as Buffy, he's fallen for the vampire slayer.

Enter Nigel Ibanescu, another dangerous man ready to become a daywalker...

Notes

Did I just write half a million words about vampire Hannigram?

Yes.

Do I still have the vampire Hannigram brainrot?

Yes.

But have no fear, this will NOT be a long-ass novel. I have a series of vignettes I want to write that are loosely connected by a thread of plot. There are time skips where what happened in between chapters is inferred based on what is revealed through dialog and narration.

Is this... mostly a vehicle for daywalker Will and Nigel and vampire Hannibal threesome smut?

... okay, yes.

Chapter 1

Baltimore – September, 2013

Margot Verger pulled up the hood of her sweatshirt, tucking her braid inside. She wore it under a jean jacket, with a long, dark skirt and the most sensible shoes she owned – a pair of riding boots. The uber driver pulled up to a small, unassuming building. It sat behind an old movie theater, a crumbling palace built during the glory days of the silver screen, now long past its prime. The neighborhood was seemingly deserted, wet with rain and the smeared reflections of sickly streetlights

Margot thanked the driver with a quick word, tipping generously, and slipped out of the little Honda. She jogged up the curb and the concrete stairs that led to a door painted a cheery yellow color, fighting the drab cinder block around it. The night was dark, and it was raining, but that wasn't the reason for her hurry – she could only pray that Mason's goons hadn't followed her. If her brother knew what she was about to do, he'd imprison her for the rest of her life. The sign over the building's door, also painted sunny yellow, read *Daylight Inc. Cleaning Company.*

Margot tried the door's handle, and found it unlocked. Awash with relief, she slipped inside. She discovered a small reception area painted in light, airy colors, smelling of a cloying mix of coffee and butterscotch scented wax melts. There was a seating area with magazines spread out on a coffee table in perfect rows, some potted plants, and a receptionist seated behind a counter with a glass partition. A white door to the left probably led into the rest of the building. It reminded Margot of a cheery dentist's office.

The receptionist was a man in his 40s, a phone tucked between his shoulder and ear as he typed away on a computer. "I see, and how many…" he trailed off, noticing Margot lingering in the waiting area. "I'll be with you in just a moment!" he said with a smile, sliding the reception window shut to continue the phone conversation in private.

When finished, he hung up and slid the window open again. "What can I do for you, sweetie?"

Margot approached, resting her shaking hands on the counter. The man looked up at her expectantly with warm brown eyes. Margot's brain was trained to scan for danger, and she instinctively glanced through the glass at the area behind the desk, noting only a copy machine, some filing cabinets, a cat calendar, the glowing wax warmer, a coffee pot, and several pictures of the receptionist with a smiling Latino man who must have been his partner. In one, they were each holding a cat, one orange, the other a tabby, neither of the felines looking very excited about having their pictures taken.

"Miss?" the secretary prompted.

Margot cleared her throat. “I’m here because…” she swallowed hard. “I was told… by Father D’Angelo at St. Genevieve's that, um…”

The man nodded encouragingly. “You have a problem that needs to be *cleaned up* ,” he suggested, wagging his eyebrows in a knowing way. “The kind of problem that, if you went to the police, nobody would believe you. The kind of problem where there’s, maybe… an infestation of…”

Margot nodded eagerly, tears coming to her eyes. “Vampires,” she whispered hoarsely. “At least, that’s what I think they are.”

“You came to the right place,” the secretary soothed, reaching through the window to pat her hand. “Now, I’m going to have you fill out some paperwork for me first, and we’ll go ahead and get the ball rolling, okay?” He gathered some forms onto a yellow plastic clipboard with a pen attached to a chain. The secretary came out from behind the counter, exiting into the waiting area through the white door, which only opened after he unlocked it. “Have a seat,” he offered.

Margot half-collapsed into one of the chairs and the receptionist handed her the forms. “My name’s Jimmy,” he said in a soft, patient tone that implied he dealt with emotional basket cases all the time. “Can I get you anything while you wait? A Sprite, some coffee…?”

“You have any whiskey?” Margot asked with a wry sneer, but was surprised to see Jimmy nod.

“On the rocks?”

“Neat,” she said, incredulous but grateful.

The paperwork was mostly contact information and a box where she was told to briefly describe her problem. Jimmy brought her a strong dram of whiskey in a pretty crystal glass, along with a box of tissues. It was only then Margot realized that she was crying, though silently, with relief.

“Don’t worry too much about writing it all out,” he said, indicating the box where she was supposed to “describe her problem.” “Just give us the basics. Mr. Crawford will get the rest of the details in the meeting, okay? All right, you let me know if you need a refill.” He smiled and returned to his desk, turning on a pop Pandora station. Margot filled out the paperwork, drank whiskey, and wrote down everything she knew about vampires while Taylor Swift’s voice filled the small room with lamentations about bleachers and cheerleaders.

About twenty minutes later, Jimmy’s desk phone beeped demurely. He picked it up. “Hi. All right, will do.” He got up and came around the front again, holding the door open. “This way, Miss…” He took the clipboard and papers from her, and read her name. “Verger.” If he recognized it, he made no indication.

Jimmy led Margot down a carpeted hall hung with unobtrusive artwork that belonged in a dental office. They passed a couple of closed doors, coming at last to one that was cracked

open, soft light coming from inside. The rain had gotten heavier, and Margot could hear it through the ceiling. Jimmy rapped on the door as he opened it.

“Come in,” came a sonorous voice, deep and masculine.

Jimmy pushed the door open the rest of the way and stepped in, moving aside to let Margot through. The office had an entirely different feel to it – almost like the old library in the Verger mansion, with dark sage walls and numerous bookshelves, lit by standing lamps and a mid-century green-shaded one on the large, gleaming dark-wood desk. The man behind the desk got to his feet and came around it to shake her hand as Jimmy placed the clipboard of paperwork in front of his chair and demurely slipped away.

“Jack Crawford,” he said, folding her small hand in his large, warm grip. “Please.” He indicated one of the two leather-covered chairs positioned in front of the desk. Margot sat, slipping off her damp jean jacket, but huddling the sweatshirt round her for warmth. Jack opened a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of scotch and two glasses, pouring them each a dram. Margot accepted hers and sipped gratefully.

Jack sat and glanced through the paperwork a moment before setting it aside and taking a mouthful of liquor. “I wondered when we might see you, Miss Verger.”

Margot’s eyes widened, and the glass in her hand shook. “You were… expecting me?”

“We’ve suspected your brother was a vampire for some time now,” Jack told her. “He’s not exactly discreet. Carlo Demurtas has had some serious cleaning up to do, especially after he murdered the Deputy Commissioner of the FDA. Still haven’t found the body.”

“The pigs…” Margot said, tears coming to her eyes.

Jack nodded. His eyes softened and he pushed a box of tissues across the desk within her reach. She accepted a couple and dried her face. “Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

Margot sniffed. “I mean, Mason’s always been… exceptionally cruel. He was born *wrong* . Mother used to say it was because when we were born, my umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck and h-he didn’t get enough oxygen to his brain. He never forgave me for that.” She drained her glass. Jack got up to fill it immediately, choosing to sit in the chair next to her instead, the bottle between them. Margot was grateful for the gesture. “But then he went on a business trip to Egypt. I don’t know why – we’ve never worked with any Egyptian companies or investors. He was gone for a long time, and I didn’t hear anything. I hoped…” She shook her head.

“It’s all right. I’m well aware that your brother is a crazy son of a bitch. You were hoping he was dead.”

She nodded. “But then, one night in January, he came home. And he was… different. That night he had his men move his entire bedroom to the bottom level of the mansion, down in what used to be the old wine cellar. And he looked… his eyes…” Margot brought her trembling glass to her lips again. “If you’d asked me before if he was a monster, of course I would have said yes. But now… he’s something else entirely. For a long time, I didn’t let

myself believe it. It's… crazy, it can't be real – it's the kind of shit that happens in movies with bad special effects! But… I saw… some of the bodies…!"

Jack put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Miss Verger, it's real," he said solemnly, but with a soothing rumble to his words. "But you've come to the right place."

"Father D'Angelo sent me," she said. "I went to the church because I… didn't know where else to go, who would believe me–"

"You're safe now," Jack vowed. "I promise. But I think it's best you remain in our facility for the time being. Is there any chance you were followed?"

"I mean, there's always a chance," Margot said. "But I don't think so."

"You were incredibly brave, coming here," he soothed. "And the information you're going to share with us will save lives. Including yours."

"You'll kill him, right?" she pressed, taking his hand. "You'll find a way to kill him? Because he's strong, he's impossibly strong – and when he gets hurt, he just-just gets up, and the wounds heal, and–!"

"Oh, we'll dispatch him, to be sure," Jack vowed. "It'll take time. As you know, your brother's built quite an empire around himself. No doubt he's strategically placed other vampires within its structure. But with your inside information, we have the upper hand."

She nodded, drying her eyes again and taking a watery breath. "Why don't you come and meet the team and see our facility?" Jack suggested. "We can start our interview later. What do you say?" He stood up and held out his hand.

Margot took it, standing up, her jacket on her arm. Jack escorted her back out into the hallway. "Jimmy, we're going in."

"All right, boss, closing up," Jimmy called back from the reception area. A few moments later, he joined them. They continued past Jack's office, and found themselves at last in front of a set of industrial-looking metal doors. The metal placard attached said CLEANING SUPPLIES and had a warning about dangerous chemicals within. Jack unlocked it, and revealed a storeroom filled with mops and buckets, jugs of cleaning solution, and a rack of protective suits. They went inside, which immediately brought a slick of fear-sweat across Margot's forehead. There was no way out – why had they brought her back here?

Jack slid the rack of protective suits to the side, revealing what looked like a cinderblock wall. But when the rack was pushed entirely to the right, it clicked, and a mechanism whirred. The rows of bricks in front of them sank down into the floor, revealing elevator doors. Jack swiped a key-card into a reader, then pressed his thumb on the pad. The elevator doors opened, and they stepped inside, Margot's eyes wide.

Jack selected a floor, and the doors whispered shut. Muzak played softly as they descended for what felt like a long time. "I love your boots," Jimmy said, breaking the tense silence. Tense for Margot, anyway.

“Oh. Thank you.”

The doors opened into a cinder block and concrete hallway, clearly subterranean but brightly lit with fluorescent lighting in the drop ceiling. “Are you… with the government?” Margot asked. The place felt like a secret CIA facility.

“We work with several agencies,” Jack told her as they walked. “But we are not part of official channels. You’re about to see Baltimore’s best-kept secret.”

“Daylight Inc.!” Jimmy chirped with a smile.

Another secure door. On the other side was another hallway, still clearly underground but less drab and secret-prison-like. There was a small seating area, and a set of bathrooms with a drinking fountain and a water cooler. Past these was a short hall that opened into a wide, circular room with several doorways leading off of it, like the hub of a wheel. In the center was a sunken area, carpeted, with tables and chairs and a large sectional couch, a huge TV mounted to the wall. They made their way around this, stopping in various doorways and greeting those within.

A beautiful woman in a chic lavender dress and matching blazer, her curls twisted into a chignon, was on the phone when they poked their heads into her elegantly-decorated office. She held up a finger. “Yes, commissioner, I know you’ve been patient. You’ll just have to be patient with us a little longer. But haven’t we given you the leads we promised?” She paused, listening, her brown eyes widening slightly when she saw Margot, a smile curving up her lipsticked mouth. “All right. Yes. Goodnight, sir.” She hung up the phone and stood.

“Margot, this is my wife, Bella. She coordinates our work with the agencies, acting as our liaison with police, FBI, all the alphabet soup, and helps grease the wheels internationally as well.”

Bella shook her hand. She smelled wonderful, her perfume fresh and vital, like a lightning strike. “Miss Verger, I’m so glad you’re here. I assume she’ll be staying, Jack?”

Jack lifted Bella’s hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “Right as always.”

“I’ll get a room ready. Jimmy, can you give me a hand?” Bella and Jimmy disappeared down another of the hallways leading out from the central hub, this one narrower, with doors lining either side, truncating in a wall. The next room they visited had a more industrial feel, brightly-lit, with stainless steel tables and counters, everything pristine white. The walls and counter tops were lined with machinery she couldn’t identify.

Two people in lab coats were there – a woman with a long river of black hair bent over a microscope, and a dark-haired man with unkempt stubble eating a piece of what looked like supreme pizza while he flipped through screens on a computer. They both looked up when Jack and Margot stepped in. “Oh my God!” the woman cried, getting to her feet and tossing off her latex gloves and protective goggles. “Margot Verger?”

Margot nodded.

“Hi!” the woman said with a huge smile, waving first, then coming closer to shake her hand.

“Dr. Beverly Katz,” Jack introduced. “And Brian Zeller–”

“Hey.” Zeller just lifted his slice of pizza in greeting.

Beverly rolled her eyes at him. “So glad you’re here,” she gushed to Margot. “Did she just get here?”

Jack nodded.

“Gah, I’m so fucking excited. We’re finally going to get him, aren’t we?”

“Well, with Miss Verger’s help–”

“Verger?” came another voice. Margot turned to see another team member lingering in the doorway, arms crossed, leaning his shoulder on the frame. He was dressed for a workout in joggers and a black tank, dark curls sweaty and tangled. He was scruffily handsome, but what caught her attention was his eyes. They were a strange shade of cerulean, harboring a ring around the pupil that glittered like hammered gold. The juxtaposition of colors reminded her of ancient Egypt. He had a fading bruise on the side of his neck and another on the inside of his elbow.

“Yeah, it’s her!” Beverly confirmed.

“And you’re, ah… showing her our secret facility. Even though her brother could have sent her here undercover, play the whole… damsel in distress thing.”

Margot bristled. “I would *never* work for my brother,” she snarled.

The man stared at her for a long moment with his uncanny eyes, and said, “You’re right, you wouldn’t.” To Jack: “Good call.” With that, he turned and left.

“That’s Will for you,” Zeller said with a sigh as he turned back to work.

“We put up with his shit because he’s our secret weapon,” Beverly said.

“Secret weapon?”

Jack gave Beverly a glowering look that clearly said, *you’re running your mouth.* But, he went on to explain, “Will Graham was recruited for this agency because of a unique feature of his brain. He has excess mirror neurons, which are usually only found in children. They allow kids to adapt to their environments and become socialized by empathizing and mimicking the adults around them in order to learn acceptable behavior and group norms. His never faded away as he grew into an adult.”

“How do you use neurons to fight vampires?” Margot was much more interested in another door they’d passed on their way. She’d seen through the small window a rack of medieval-style weapons, everything from swords to battle axes. Those seemed a little more useful than a weird brain.

“I developed a serum called Daylight,” Beverly said, her eyes sparkling with a mixture of excitement and pride, “engineered specifically for Will’s DNA using stem cells and… well, a bunch of other shit I won’t bore you with. But it gave him all the same powers as a vampire with none of the drawbacks. He doesn’t have to drink blood, isn’t bothered by the sun. But most importantly, he’s resistant to their mental powers.”

“So he’s our most important asset, as a field agent–” Jack began, but Beverly wasn’t finished.

“See, vampires can sense one another with their minds, kind of like a mental radar system,” she rambled on. It was cute, though, Margot thought, how excited she was about her work. “Some of the most ancient ones can even do this mind whammy thing where they can read your thoughts and make you do shit, forget things. But the radar is the worst part, because even though we have a vampire on staff, he’d never be able to get the drop on anyone. Will can pass for human with a pair of contacts–”

“Wait, you have a vampire…” Margot’s heart clenched and she tasted bitterness and whiskey rising up the back of her throat.

“Oh, no, he’s cool,” Beverly promised. “He only kills other vampires or drinks donated blood.”

Jack sighed a heavy, put-upon sigh. “Beverly, Miss Verger has had a long night…”

“Oh. Right. Sure. Well, if you have any other questions…” Beverly backed off, then mouthed, *sorry!* at Jack. “I’ll just… be over here now… with, uh… my centrifuge…”

Jack guided Margot out of the room by the small of her back. “Might as well rip off the band-aid,” he said. “Let’s go meet him. Then we’ll call it a night, all right?”

Margot nodded. Jack’s hand on her back was calming, and she managed to get her trembling under control. They left the hub and went down another hallway, this one much longer. Through another secure door, they entered a cellar-like opening, made of limestone and dripping with moisture. Margot shivered, pulling her jacket more tightly around herself. This opened into what looked like an old basement. Parts of it were clearly storage, full of boxes and seemingly random junk; old cardboard cutouts of celebrities from twenty, thirty, forty years ago, mechanical parts for some kind of small machine, mouse-gnawed red velvet chairs with folding seats. The other section of the basement was much tidier and housed a work bench and an impressive collection of power tools. On the workbench at the moment was a fancy old chandelier that was in the process of repair.

Up the stairs they went, finding themselves in a small, unadorned room with another staircase leading up. An Art Deco-style sign had an arrow pointing up the next staircase that said PROJECTOR ROOM.

Jack opened the door and they stepped out into the shabby lobby of what must have been the old movie theater. Half the carpet was torn up, but the ticket office had been restored, the glass panels replaced, the wood stained dark and gleaming. The front doors were chained shut and all of the windows had newspaper taped over them.

Somewhere, music was playing – something classical.

Jack pushed open the red swinging doors that opened into the theater itself. It was beautiful, despite its state of disrepair, with gold-painted columns and intricate gilded molding, everything draped in scarlet. There was a stage in front of the screen, and both were bordered by more red and gold velvet curtains. The stage lights were on low, and on the stage was a harpsichord.

Margot could tell the man playing it wasn't human. She was getting pretty good at identifying vampires now. He was coldly handsome, with pouting lips and a rounded chin, cheekbones for days, his ash-maple hair perfectly coiffed and combed to the side. He was wearing a dark brown suit with a red floral-patterned tie, but had his jacket off and his sleeves rolled up to play.

And Will, the secret weapon, was sitting right next to him on the bench, pressed up against his side, arm slung around his middle, nuzzling against the side of his neck.

Will started and lifted his head, somehow knowing Jack and Margot were there, though the door hadn't made a sound and their footsteps were muffled by the thick-pile carpet. He scowled, slowly disengaging himself from the vampire playing the harpsichord, who didn't miss a note, and stood, arms crossed. Jack took Margot over to a small set of stairs at the edge of the stage.

Just as they reached the harpsichord, the vampire reached the end of the song. Jack clapped a few times, showing off a gap-toothed grin. "Another banger, Dr. Lecter."

The vampire stood and approached, offering his hand. Margot's danger sense flared, and she edged back before she could stop herself, noting the creature's glassy nails, ivory skin, and maroon eyes. "Dr. Hannibal Lecter," he said. "A pleasure, Miss Verger." Margot must have looked startled that he knew her name, which she was, but Dr. Lecter soothed, "I've seen your picture before during our briefings. We've had our collective eye on your brother for some time now."

His hand was still hanging in the air. Remembering what Beverly said, Margot at last reached out for a brief squeeze. His hand was so cold, smooth like silk but hard like living stone beneath. She shivered involuntarily.

"May I offer you something to drink?"

"They're not staying," Will said, coming up behind the vampire. Margot tried not to notice his physique, which was rather evident in the workout gear. He was shorter than Jack and Dr. Lecter, slender-framed, but cut with lean muscle and bulked out in the chest, arms, and thighs especially. "Right, Jack? Because I just got back from an assignment?"

Jack shook his head with a chuckle. "No, we're not staying. I just wanted to introduce Margot and make sure she wasn't caught off guard by Dr. Lecter's presence."

Too late for that, Margot thought.

“You must have faced a supreme ordeal, escaping your brother and coming to us. If you feel the need to talk about it, I am a licensed psychiatrist and happy to lend an ear.” It was so weird, hearing that offer, said in such an honest and caring way, coming from a mouth full of fangs, two sets on the top and a smaller one on the bottom.

“...thanks,” she managed.

“All right, let’s leave these two alone for their little reunion.” Jack turned and led Margot back down to the aisle.

“Goodnight Jack. Miss Verger,” Dr. Lecter called after them. When Margot glanced back, she saw Will’s arms embracing the vampire from behind and whispering into his ear.

When they were headed down to the basement of the old movie palace, Jack said, “I know, I know – it’s a thing. The man who’s been transformed into the perfect vampire hunter becoming… shall we say, entangled… with a vampire. Let’s just say, the irony isn’t lost on me.”

“Can you trust him?” Margot wanted to know as Jack swiped his card to let them back into the facility proper. “Aren’t they… I mean, Mason was evil before, but now… he’s *soulless* . They all are.”

“Dr. Lecter comes from an ancient bloodline that seems to have some different traits from your average vampire. Most of them are like you said, soulless, no remorse, ready to kill a family member they loved dearly before the change. But obviously, Hannibal’s different. He wants to use his gifts to protect human lives. He hunts other bloodsuckers with Will sometimes. And we’ll need him to get rid of your brother, no doubt about it.”

They met up with Bella at the hub. “I’m going to steal her from you now,” she said, extending a kind hand toward Margot. “It’s late. I’ll show you your room. We can pick this up tomorrow.”

“Of course. Bella knows best.” Jack winked at his wife. “Margot,” he said, turning to her and putting his large, reassuring hand on her arm again. “You did a great thing tonight. I’m not going to say it’ll be over quickly, but with you on the team, we’re going to stop Mason, I promise.”

“Thank you,” she said, sincerely, though weariness tugged on every word.

“All right. Goodnight.” Jack raised a hand in goodbye as Bella took Margot down another hall to a series of comfortable but impersonal rooms, as though a wing of a hotel had been transplanted underground. The only thing missing were the windows – otherwise, it was like the Holiday Inn Express – beds and a TV, bathroom, coffeemaker, all of it.

“There’s a phone on the desk and a list of numbers to call if you need something,” Bella told her. “Do you have a cell phone?”

“I left it in the uber,” Margot said. “Hid it really well. That way if Mason’s tracking it, he’ll just be following a car driving all over Baltimore.”

“Clever girl!” Bella praised. “The drawers over there have some clothes inside, nothing fancy, but we’ll get your sizes tomorrow and order what you need. Can you think of anything else…?”

“Whiskey?”

“Bedside drawer,” Bella smiled. “There should be a Valium or two in the bathroom if you need it.”

“Thank you,” Margot said, tears of sincerity filling her eyes. “So much.”

“Sleep well,” Bella said, easing the door shut. “For the first night in a long time, you’re entirely safe. Just rest.”

Margot took Bella’s advice as best she could, changing out of her clothes and into some soft pajamas she found in the drawers. While she waited for the Valium to take effect, she found a pad of paper and a pen and wrote down everything she knew about what was going to happen in Los Angeles next week.

Jack and his team had to stop the auction and save who they could.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> Acting on Margot's intel, Will and Hannibal go undercover to a vampire harem auction in search of Mason Verger. Predictably, a bloodbath ensues, which serves as excellent foreplay.

Hollywood Hills Outside Los Angeles – September, 2013

Hannibal studied Will with soft eyes and an amused smile. “You look lovely tonight.”

Will’s response was to drain an airline-sized bottle of whiskey from the limo’s mini bar. “I can’t believe I let you talk me into this,” he muttered.

“Having second thoughts?” Hannibal smiled wider, an adoring curve of his aristocratic lips. “Tonight is a perfect opportunity to catch Mason unawares and dispatch him.”

“I know, but you’re the one who came up with this whole undercover plan, darlin'. And I can tell you’re going to enjoy… *entirely* too much.” Will sighed in exasperation as Hannibal withdrew the velvet case from beneath the limo seat and opened it. Within was a thick gold sub collar, studded intermittently with tasteful clusters of diamonds and rubies. It was attached to a long chain with a similarly adorned handle on the end. *That's a leash,* Will thought darkly, *call it what it is* .

“If you’ll forgive me, beloved, mine is a better plan than your plan." Hannibal lifted the collar delicately from the silk-lined case and admired it in the Los Angeles streetlights that flashed along the tinted windows of the limo.

“Simple plans are better. And require a lot less of me being dragged around like your puppy.”

“My treasure,” Hannibal murmured, leaning against him, sneaking a cold, preternatural hand along his thigh. Will begrudgingly put his arm around him as Hannibal kissed his neck lightly. “You've never once complained about being my pet before.”

“Oh good God,” Will growled as Hannibal leaned over to carefully fasten the collar around his throat. It was heavy. Well made, yes, but also burdened with shame.

“Besides, your plan wasn’t a plan, Will. Ram the front doors with a truck, and then jump out and start shooting — there are going to be humans in attendance tonight. Margot directed us to preserve mortal life at all costs.” He gave the chain a playful tug, rattling it faintly.

Will caught Hannibal's jaw in his hand and squeezed it. "Hannibal, I swear—"

Hannibal peeled his hand from his face easily with an iron grip. "What do you swear, *brangusis* ?"

"I'm gonna make you pay for this," Will threatened, but there was a smile behind it. He leaned in and Hannibal allowed a kiss, then two.

"Is that a promise?"

"Sure."

Hannibal traced along his eyebrow with the pad of his thumb. "These contacts," he complained with a shake of his head, staring into Will's eyes. "I prefer the blue. The brown does nothing for your complexion. Admittedly, they hide the gold better. But I'm a creature of aesthetics."

"Hmm." Will slipped his fingers up Hannibal's back, kissing his cool mouth. He was good enough at it now not to worry about the teeth. "Han, listen — be careful." Will shifted back, trying to calm the nerves that vibrated through his body. "You haven't been out in the field for awhile, not for a big operation like this."

"I'm sure it's like riding a bicycle."

Will thought for a minute, then turned to him. "Do you *know* how to ride a bicycle?"

Hannibal considered. "No," he answered.

The limo wound up through the darkened hills into more secluded territory, reaching a hilltop compound surrounded by a combination of thick trees, brush, and an imposing black iron fence. The gate opened as their car approached, and the limo traveled up a long lane towards an impressive mansion, a modern thing done in the Spanish style, large but not ostentatious, with a flagstone patio flanked by arbors threaded through with vines. It was alive with light, music, and people.

"Ready?"

"No," Will complained, but got out when the driver opened the door for him. He held out a hand which Hannibal took to gracefully exit. As he stepped out into the moonlight, Will couldn't help his heart's sudden leap. Hannibal looked incredible in red, as always, his suit plaid-patterned in the violent, rich shade. He wore it over a white dress shirt of a standard cut but made of some kind of filmy, practically see-through material. His hair was slicked back more severely than usual, giving him an even more sinister appearance. Will wore black, simple, unadorned except for the goddamn collar and chain, his shirt unbuttoned at the neck to give a hint of what lay beneath.

"Hey." Will closed his fingers into Hannibal's hand as the driver shut the door and drove away without another word. "You *will* be careful, right?"

Hannibal smiled gently, dark-blood eyes glowing with the soft light coming from the house, accompanied by strains of dance music. He put his cool fingers to Will's cheek briefly, a momentary caress. "Of course. As I expect you to be. I'm sorry about the trafficked humans and the bystanders, of course, but if something goes wrong, you're the only one I'm concerned with."

"Understood."

Hannibal wound the golden chain around his hand and gave it the smallest pull. "Come along then."

"Un-fucking-believable," Will muttered under his breath as Hannibal approached the security guard at the entrance. Beyond the opened double doors, Hollywood elites partied all throughout the lower floors of the mansion. Perfect cover, Will thought, for what was actually happening tonight.

The guard took one look at the chain and collar and directed them to a side entrance past the rose garden. There they were met by a girl with freckles and auburn hair, no older than 20.

Will knew her for a vampire before she opened the door — she was one of a solid handful in the vicinity whose presence he could mentally sense. But damn, it was a shame. She'd been so young when she was made UnDead. Sick, Will thought, how innocent she looked, like a midwestern college freshman, all wide-eyes and wind-chafed skin, idealistic and trying out adulthood. Weird to think she was a bloodsucking fiend. Her prey probably never knew she was coming.

The sudden flicker of sickened surprise that flashed through her fierce green eyes made Will's stomach drop. *She recognizes us* , Will's mind warned. But the flash disappeared immediately as she smiled, openly showing them her feral teeth. "Good evening, welcome. Mr. Jakov?"

Hannibal took her glass-nailed hand in his and shook it. "Yes. Thank you for your invitation. You must be Abigail."

"I am. Forgive me, when I opened the door and saw your…" she motioned to Will. "I was… briefly overcome."

"He has that effect," Hannibal told her through a knowing smile.

"Please." Abigail stepped back and motioned them inside a small foyer that connected a couple of hallways. A staircase wound up to their left. "Everyone else has arrived. They're very anxious to meet you." Her eyes snapped over to Will for just the briefest second before her gaze fled back to the safety of Hannibal. "I'm sure you read my messages about the expected conduct, but one of our rules is that I verbally confirm that you understand the procedures."

"Of course."

“Every human in the room is the property of the accompanying vampire. You’ll be able to tell who is with whom fairly easily, through dress or other indicators. The bidding starts in an hour, after everyone’s acquainted. Bids and any other trade deals will appear on the screens on the walls as they are recorded at the clerk’s desk next to the verandah doors. It will continue for one hour. When the hour is up, all offers are final. Then everyone is free to enjoy themselves while I complete the transactions.” So adult and businesslike. Will was again destabilized, hearing it all come from that childlike face in her bell-like voice.

She looked at Will again, and he could tell it was involuntary. But was it really something she was trying to avoid out of politeness? Something about her was confusing his empathy. “As you interact with other companions you may be interested in acquiring, please note that there is to be no tasting until just before the transaction is finalized as part of quality control. Touching is allowed, but close inspections should also be saved for the finalization process. Do you have any questions?”

“None at this time.”

“And lastly, your companion’s name, for the auction board?”

Hannibal glanced over at Will and smiled benevolently. “This is — Sebastian.” Of course Hannibal would give him an alias based on his favorite saint – loved not for his martyrdom or devotion to God, but for the erotic way he was always painted, tied up naked and arrow-pierced.

“Thank you. This way, please.” Abigail led them up the stairs to a long salon that opened out onto an equally long covered verandah that overlooked the twinkling lights of Los Angeles. The space was arranged with several plush sectionals and chairs angled together in small groups. Soft lo-fi music played, background noise. Small tables had been arranged with *hors d’orderves* and glasses of champagne already poured.

Will swept the room with his gaze and his mind. Four vampires here, slithery and cold in his brain, besides Abigail, who excused herself as soon as she showed them in, and Hannibal, who paused to reach up and unhook the chain from the golden collar. This he took and wrapped around his own wrist, leaving the handle dangling. The chain ended with a small oblong hand grip, which matched the gold and gemstone design of the collar, signifying who “Sebastian” belonged to. Will counted roughly twenty humans in attendance as well. Each of them wore something that connected them to their vampire masters — a matching set of necklaces, a particular flower pinned to clothing or in the hair, and, in one case, a tattoo.

These “companions” — slaves, victims, in actuality — came from all ethnic backgrounds, women, men, gender fluid, but they were all *marked* in some way. Each was beautiful, of course, groomed and well dressed, but vaguely sickly, exhausted, bags under their eyes. A world of endless night, the constant anemia. Many also wore scarves, high-necked collars, or other adornments to cover the marks on their throats. Will knew his own was bruised on one side, but it was probably nothing compared to the scarring and trauma to the necks of these mortals, much less other places on their bodies. One of the benefits of Beverly’s serum was rapid healing.

On the wall hung large flat-screen monitors with lists of names on them. There was an initial to indicate who the master was, and a column for bids. Will scanned the names and suppressed a curse. Mason Verger wasn't here. Not among the buyers, anyway.

The vampires worked their way through the room, greeting the offered companions, examining them physically, asking them questions.

This was what Jack and Margot wanted to destroy — the buying, selling, and trading of human beings as part of a vampire harem. Of course the police were going to be of no use. Daylight Inc. would clean up this mess, like they always did. All of these vampires were going to die tonight. The thought made Will's mouth twitch a smile. And even if Mason Verger had been tipped off and made himself scarce, the mission wasn't a total loss. The removal of this operation was sure to hurt him, financially at least.

Hannibal handed Will a glass of champagne as all eyes in the room, natural and supernatural, tracked their movements. They were immediately approached by a female vampire with rippling golden hair and painted lips, a purple rose pinned to the lapel of her burgundy suit jacket. Elsewhere in the room roamed her harem, several humans with a matching flower somewhere on their person.

"Good evening," she greeted. The pleasantries were directed entirely at Hannibal — Will's apparent status made courtesy unnecessary. Anger flared in his gut like he'd just taken a drink of scaldingly hot coffee. He was just *pretending* to be nothing but an object, and it pissed him off that fucking much. What was it like for all these humans, being treated like meat, like animals, for years at a time, if they were lucky to live that long?

"You must be Boris Jakov," the vampire greeted, buying the alias. "I'm Vivian. A pleasure. This is my first time in Hollywood. I'm overwhelmed with the hospitality."

Hannibal inclined his head, an elegant, continental gesture, and shook her hand. "The pleasure is mine."

"Indeed." She glanced up at Will for the first time. His skin crawled as he watched her examine him with the keen observance of the marketplace. "You've only brought the one?"

"Yes," Hannibal affirmed, putting a hand on the small of Will's back. He could feel the cold of his fingertips through the thin material of his shirt. "I've others, of course, but they're still quite suitable and I'm loath to part with them. This one, on the other hand…"

Vivian reached out and squeezed Will's arm in several places, noting the musculature, then pushed aside his shirt collar, examining the fading marks. She used the pads of her fingers to guide his lips open and look at his teeth. "He appears remarkably flawless. Why are you so eager to sell?"

Hannibal glanced at Will with a hint of what was, he hoped, feigned irritation. "He's become increasingly willful over the last year. He is exquisite in every way, but keeping him in line has become a chore that overshadows his more desirable qualities."

The room was very quiet, with only the occasional murmur from the other guests. Will noted that the three other vampires had shifted closer in the room, wandering to various chairs or to lean against the back of a couch within earshot, very clearly eavesdropping. There was a dark haired bloodsucker wearing a suit jacket with no shirt underneath paired with low-slung pants. The aim being, apparently, to show off his admittedly impressive physique. Mr. Abdominals stood next to a redhead with deeply painted lips, wearing a pale blue dress that resembled stitched-together lace. Another vampire in attendance looked like he'd fallen right out of the 80s, complete with the shiny brown mullet. He leaned against the mantle of the gas fireplace, eyes fixed on Wil. The final monster was a diminutive but terrifying little creature with curly silver-streaked black hair, and huge, haunting white-blue eyes.

"Obedience is convenient, of course," Vivian murmured, taking Will's hand in her own. He shivered involuntarily at her grip, which made her smile as she unbuttoned his cuffs and pushed up his sleeves to look at his wrists and inner elbows. "Training does require a certain level of patience."

"That's just the problem," Hannibal sighed, playing with a strand of Will's hair, curling it absently around his finger before slipping it behind his ear. The touch was welcome; it mattered to Will *who* was objectifying him, it seemed. "I've been far too lenient, and he's developed bad habits."

"He tries to escape?"

"He's tried before," Hannibal answered, unable to help himself, it seemed, as he dropped Will a miniscule wink. "Doesn't play well with others."

"I see. Thank you, Mr. Jakov. I hope you'll consider some of my creatures as well. Perhaps a trade could be arranged."

"Delightful, thank you, Ms. Vivian."

She returned to the sofa where the pale-eyed one sat, staring unabashedly at Will from beneath silver-threaded curls. The bloodsuckers began talking in low voices, fangs flashing in the light.

A moment later, as Will was still trying to swallow his disgust, Abigail appeared at Hannibal's side again. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Jakov. I have a question about something on Sebastian's paperwork. Would you mind stepping into my office for a moment?"

A cloud shifted over Hannibal's brow, but it was only for part of a second. Will's chest clenched as the warning klaxon went off in his head. But what could Hannibal say except, "Of course. Sebastian, behave yourself. Try to mingle. I'll be back shortly."

Will nodded, his nerves on high alert as he tried to track each vampire simultaneously. Due to the nature of the event, he doubted anyone would try anything. Unless somebody recognized him for who he was. Daylight Inc. was developing quite a reputation, and while Jack and the rest of the team did what they could to keep Will's identity a secret, it wasn't impossible that there were pictures of him circling through vampire society. He could feel the serpentine power radiating from the UnDead in the room, some stronger than others. The ambient pulse

in his head, his empathy, shifted from gold to red. The pale-eyed one had him the most worried, seemed the most inhuman. That particular bloodsucker was old, made centuries ago, and twice as deadly as a consequence.

As Hannibal exited, Will took his drink and sat in a chair near several of the others up for auction, rage threading through him again as he watched Vivian examine the teeth of a Black woman in a gruesome recreation of the slavery her ancestors had already suffered. Two young women wearing ruby necklaces that matched the ring on mullet-guy's finger slid closer on the sofa to Will, bowing their heads to talk softly. "Your master — what's his name?" one asked. Her chestnut skin would have been lovely if she wasn't so wan, waxy.

"Boris Jakov," Will told them, determined to do and say as little as possible until Hannibal returned and they could resume the plan.

"Is he nice? He sounds nice."

"Define *nice* ," Will couldn't help but answer. It was actually one of his least favorite words.

"Does he treat you good?" the stick-thin brunette asked over the first girl's shoulder. "I mean, aside from the drinking — does he like to hurt you, or does he do it nice?"

"Depends on his mood."

"You should quit trying to escape. Just do as you're told," the brunette advised, sipping her champagne. "You'll live longer. Manuel's not too bad. A lot better than the one I was with before. When she got killed I thought I might get to go home but…" She smiled at him, the faintest shimmer of tears in her eyes. "Nobody goes home."

"Don't give up," he told them softly. "One night can change everything."

"You're sweet, Sebastian. I hope we end up in the same harem," the brunette said, and her companion agreed. "I know it's stupid, because they're so fast and strong, but I think I'd feel a little safer with you around."

"You would be," Will said, his throat threatening to close with rage and the strangling pain of his empathy. He stood quickly. "I need a cigarette."

Will headed for the verandah, hoping to catch sight of the stashed weapons they'd bribed a landscaper to conceal outside in a large pot of flowers and ornamental grasses. He'd feel a little less anxious knowing for sure they were within reach.

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Abigail was made a monster at a tender age, and recently. I rarely feel anything but antipathy for other vampires, especially the rude or those who consider themselves the top of the food chain, but there is a softness in her that elicits an unexplainable sympathy. She leads me back down the stairs and through another door. Beyond is a tasteful but nondescript office with a thick, shining wooden desk and two wingback chairs in front of it. She offers me a seat, then

settles across from me in the desk chair, looking like a child in her father's study. I certainly hope for her sake that this isn't some kind of a ploy to separate me from Will.

She is trembling, though her voice remains calm. I realize in an awful moment that she is utterly terrified and determined not to show it. Abigail sucks in a steadying breath and places her glass-nailed hands palms down on the desk where I can easily see them, a gesture of goodwill. "I know who you are," she says softly, "and I am begging you for *mercy* ."

Ice fills me to the tip of each nerve. I find myself rigid, stone-still, all of my senses singing the highest octave, watching her so closely that I will know within fractions of a second if she tenses her muscles to move.

"Please, let me talk to you. I…I want to — I have something to say. After you hear it, and you still want to kill me, go ahead. Just, please, make it — make it quick. Don't burn me."

My hand curls around the arm of the chair, ready to use it as leverage to leap over the desk and tear out her throat. "I'm listening," I say.

She tosses her auburn hair behind her shoulder, a nervous little movement. "You and I are family," she says.

That, I didn't expect.

"Count Hannibal Lecter is your real name."

This vampire girl with the innocent face is clever, and it makes me curious. "How did you know that?"

Fear slices across her symmetrical features, making her eyes all the brighter, ringed by thick black lashes. "Then that means…" her voice hitches in her throat, and she has to free it to whisper, "... Daylight Inc."

"Yes," I confirm. "As you said, you know who we are. You likely know why we are here. But I want you to tell me, how are we related?"

Her emerald eyes water, as if she might cry. "Bedelia du Maurier"

My ears ring with the name of my creator, the creature that damned me to these centuries of blood and darkness. Also, a tiny voice reminds me, the one who allowed my destiny to cross paths with Will Graham's. I haven't seen my maker since the night of the change.

I wait, unmoving. I haven't been this motionless since mortal death.

"She made me a vampire," Abigail says. "1986. I was on a church choir trip to Europe. I got separated from my group and these guys mugged me — and I fought back, so one of them stabbed me. I was gonna die. Then — she came. She was so… small… but she killed them. Tore them apart. And she changed me. And then she just…" she trails off helplessly.

"Left," I finish for her, the word slipping between my lips, a whisper from the past.

“She said, ‘let this be your last moment of *weakness* ,’” Abigail begins, though we finish the phrase in harmony.

I lean back in the chair, my mind cycling back through centuries to the sunset of my creation. It is deep within the memory palace. I stand before a long hall of doors, some of which have not been opened in many, many years. But Bedelia is here, a coldly beautiful specter haunting the halls. I conjure Bedelia’s glacial eyes, her delicately noble features, the cruel set of her mouth, Mischa screaming at my side, begging Bedelia to help us, to save her brother —

I close the door in my mind, and focus on Abigail again. “How did you become involved with harem trafficking?”

“Most vampires have a blood family to join,” Abigail says, scorn curling the edges of her words. Or is it jealousy? “They stay with their creators, learn from them, and have siblings. But you and I? We were alone, weren’t we? Didn’t even truly know what we were. We only had our brains and our instincts to guide us. I could have joined up with Gideon’s clan down in Keystone City — glad I didn’t — but instead I came out here and found Estelle. She’s the one who owns this place, and runs the auction. She took me under her wing, or whatever you want to call it.”

Estelle Komeda, surely. The creature foolish enough to make Mason Verger into a vampire. “Is Estelle here tonight?” I inquire, using the even tone I take with patients in therapy.

Abigail shakes her head. A measure of calm seems to have returned to her, though her movements are still jerky, edged. “She only attends when she has merchandise she wants to move.”

“You’re complicit in this, then.” I raise an eyebrow, meant to suggest a measure of disapproval, a piece of the suit I wear for Daylight Inc. I certainly won’t judge her for it. Humans are pigs to slaughter, but part of being with Will – and avoiding Daylight Inc. turning their sword points toward my heart – is keeping my ambivalence to myself.

However, I will say trading herds of humans, keeping them prisoner to feed from, is simply lazy. Bad taste. Yes, the modern world is much more dangerous to hunt in without detection, but I do believe in sporting chances.

“Please,” she murmurs, tears springing to her eyes again. “You have to believe me. I hate this. I hate what I have to do to these people. But harems prevent average people on the street from being hunted and killed. Granted, these vampires are doing it out of convenience and forensics, but either way, the body count is many times lower, trust me.” She dabs at her cheeks with the back of her hand. Her misery seeps into me, unwinding some of my coils. Disarming, Clever. Was she this manipulative as a human girl?

“I’ve never seen another vampire weep,” I say, voicing my thoughts aloud, to my own surprise. “I thought I was the only one.”

“It’s our bloodline,” she vows. “I’ve met two others that descend from du Maurier. She’s made many of us over the years, though a lot of our family tends to get killed or self destruct. Side effect of being some of the only vampires that seem to still experience emotion.”

I blink, my breath momentarily tight. “I assumed I was the only one — an aberration, a miscreation— but you’re telling me that you feel? You can love?”

She nods miserably. “I was so scared you were going to kill me,” she gushes suddenly, tears streaming down her face. Abigail places her hands to her nose and mouth to try and quiet the sobs that threaten to erupt. “I knew it was you the second I saw you, and it clicked — your companion had to be the Daywalker.” She sniffed. “Bedelia du Maurier talked to me for hours, as I went through the change — and she told me about you. She said, ‘you have brothers and sisters across the globe, if you have the will to find them, the strength’. She said you were her proudest achievement. That you were a monster with a soul who found a way to *thrive* .”

I move slowly, as not to frighten her, getting to his feet. “Sister.” I say it tenderly, holding out a hand to her. Manipulation is still on the table, but I can’t have Will kill her tonight. I have unanswered questions. Abigail takes my hand and gets to her feet, fear still wrapped in her muscles. They relax in slow increments as I guide her into a gentle embrace. She finally leans her head against my chest to cry. “God is beyond measure in his wanton malice, and yet matchless in his irony. That I would come here and find you.”

“You won’t let him hurt me, will you?” she murmurs into my lapel.

“Who?”

“The Daywalker.” She shivers under my grasp.

“You’re safe,” I assure her, drawing back to look her in the face. I skim the back of his fingers gently over her cheeks. “I’m on my honor to protect you.”

“Thank you,” she sighs behind a sob, her lungs wavering in her chest. “Oh God, thank you, thank you.”

I hold her tightly for a long moment, inhaling her scent — something safe and familiar that reminds me so much of himself, layered with warm amber-musk perfume. Then, I put my hands on her shoulders and lock eyes with her. “We are going to kill the rest of them, and free the humans. You must escape. We’ll meet up later, as soon as we can. Daylight Inc. can’t know about you.”

“Here.” She produces a notepad from the desk and writes down a series of numbers. “It’s an answering service. Leave a message, and tell me where you are or how to get in touch.”

I secure the paper in my suit jacket’s inner pocket. “Arrange your face, Abigail.” She swipes at my coat to dab away the wetness, then does the same with her eyes and cheeks. “We’ll be together again soon.”

She flings herself at me again for a crushing embrace, then releases me, nodding. He grasp her chin and kiss her cheek.

And now I must go. Will is in danger, I have no doubt. He's proven adept at getting himself into trouble.

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The proximity of the human house party downstairs meant they couldn't use guns. Not that Hannibal would have, but Will was relegated to a blade as well. His knife and Hannibal's sword were where they were supposed to be, wrapped in black cloth and tucked clandestinely in the dirt of the planter at the end of the verandah, out of sight of the sets of French doors, the leaves and fronds artfully arranged to cover them.

Relieved, Will shook out a cigarette. Hannibal wanted him to quit, but once Beverly revealed that the serum made the cells of his organs regenerate, it was hard not to take advantage of the fact that his lungs wouldn't suffer. His eyes drifted over the glimmering monstrosity of the city below — *That's funny,* he thought . *LA puts the city in monstrosity, I should tell Hannibal —*

He started at the unmistakable sound of a sparking lighter. No-shirt vamp was suddenly right next to him, a slender but clearly muscled figure in black, holding out a flame in his hand, a small smile playing over his coy, almost boyish features. Will recovered quickly and leaned over to light his cigarette, blowing the smoke back over his shoulder.

"Good evening, Sebastian. I'm Matthew."

Will nodded, averted his eyes, trying to appear subservient… when *man* , he *really* wanted to kill this guy.

"I'm surprised," the vampire said, leaning against the verandah's railing with one elbow, ripped body angled toward Will, who was now cornered, the three-storey drop at his back. The weapons, however, were in reach, though it'd take a hot second to free them.

"About what?" Will asked, trying to keep his tone and posture respectful. Where the hell was Hannibal?

"Several things." His voice was low, and his cerulean eyes glimmered with preternatural canniness. "He lets you smoke?"

"Helps me keep my girlish figure."

Matthew laughed openly, his lips drawn back, flashing his inhuman teeth without remorse. "And a sense of humor. You are something special. You must be insufferably defiant if he's willing to part with you." He cocked his head, watching Will put the cigarette to his lips again. "Did you come out here to try and escape?"

Will tossed a glance over the railing. "Thought about it. But you can't run if your legs are broken." He shrugged.

"Sassy." The vampire moved closer to him, his movements so fluid Will felt like he was floating. With cold fingers, he reached out and pushed Will's lips up to look at his teeth, tilting his chin this way and that. Frosty revulsion climbed along Will's spine, and he couldn't stop himself from jerking his head away. Matthew caught him by the hair, pressed close to

him now, hand around his other wrist squeezing so tightly he dropped the cigarette. “Jakov must be *spineless* . I could break you, and enjoy the process immensely.”

Will forced himself to remain still, eyes averted. Matthew released him in increments, then slowly unbuttoned Will’s shirt further, pushing the fabric aside. “He must have plucked you when you were young,” he murmured, tracing his fingers over the white scarring along his collarbone, the remnants of close to a year of love bites from Hannibal. “You heal remarkably well. Another asset. It’s too bad Vivian is going to outbid me.” He slid an arm around the small of Will’s back and gripped him by the collar, drawing him in, pressing his face into the flesh just above Will’s collarbone. He inhaled deeply. “You smell delicious. So warm…”

Easy now. Just take it, don’t react—

The thoughts came too late. “Don’t touch me.” Will put his hands on the UnDead’s shoulders and pushed with sudden strength, his skin crawling where he’d been manhandled.

Matthew released him and stepped back, a sadistic smile on his face. He reached up to withdraw a length of blood red scarf he’d been using as a pocket square, chuckling softly to himself as he wound it between his fingers. “I see what he means about your attitude. It leaves *much* to be desired.”

For a second, Will thought he was going to turn around and leave. Instead, the vampire moved, a blur of speed, and took him by the throat, strong enough to lift him up by his neck. Will’s feet barely touched the ground as he was pressed into the side of the house, his hands locked around Matthew’s wrist. Completely unbothered by the effort, the vampire used his free hand to loop the scarf through the ring on his collar and pull it tight. Leashed again, the silk wound through his attacker’s hand.

Matthew dropped him all at once and Will fell on his hands and knees. The UnDead circled behind him and yanked the collar tight, a knee in Will’s back for leverage. “Stay down, if you want to take another breath,” the vampire said conversationally. Will forced himself to remain still, and the pressure on his neck slowly loosened. “Get up.” He obeyed, burning with fury, as the vampire guided him to his feet by the leash and collar. Where the absolute fuck was Hannibal? This whole operation was about to go tits up.

Matthew pressed him against the side of the house again, well out of sight of the French doors, hand wound tightly around the fabric attached to his collar. He tilted his head and leaned in. “Wait,” Will tried. One drop of his blood, and his cover was blown – he didn’t taste human anymore, not after the changes from Beverly’s serum. “You know the rules. No tasting, remember?”

The UnDead snarled his other hand in Will’s hair and forced his head to the side. “If not now, when? I told you Vivian’s going to outbid me.”

The ambient pulse in his head whirred, and sliced back and forth, his empathy scrabbling for a grip. He chose an angle and went for it, Hail Mary. “Maybe you can, ah… *afford* me down the road,” Will suggested softly, sliding his voice into a seductive purr. “Y’know, when she’s ready for a trade-in. I’m assuming I’ll, ah… *depreciate* in value over time, the more miles on me.”

Matthew's eyes crinkled at the edges when he grinned. It was still a cold, inhuman expression. "There's that charm again. Now I know why he's so permissive with you."

"I don't want to go with her." Will forced himself to smile softly, run his fingers along the vampire's sable lapels, then brushed them over the little hollow of his throat, the defined ridges of his taut abdominals.

"Interesting." Matthew relaxed his grip on Will's hair into a caress, smoothing it back into place.

"I'd rather go with you," Will lied through his teeth, the empathy guiding every word, every tiny expression of his face to sell his grift. He reached up to touch the maneater's face, but Matthew caught his wrist and held it for a moment, studying him. Then he turned and kissed Will's palm with his cold lips.

"Very interesting," he whispered. "Either you're too clever for your own good, or this night has provided me with quite the opportunity." He pressed into Will entirely, trapping him against the wall with his knee between Will's legs, still holding the leash, his free hand caressing the side of his face. "You'd rather have me than your master? Or Vivian? She's powerful. Quite civilized. I'm sure she'd treat you well enough." He stared into Will's contact-covered eyes as if looking for a lie.

"The second I saw you, I hoped I'd be yours," Will whispered in small breaths, feigning a fawning arousal, sliding his arms around Matthew with tentative, virginal touches. Fuck. Fucking fuck. Hannibal better get here or this was about to go off the fucking rails.

"You were so desperate to run before," the vampire uttered, brushing Will's lower lip with his thumb. "What if you ran with me? We could be miles away before they realized what happened."

"What about the rest of your harem?"

He shrugged. "No great loss. I was getting bored of them anyway. But you — I find you fascinating. This sudden willingness…" He trailed off, fingering Will's collarbone again.

"You've got a firm hand. Not like Boris. He's like you said — permissive. He, ah… *never* earned my respect."

Matthew grinned and yanked on the leash, making Will inhale sharply as it jerked his head and neck painfully. "I told you I could break you."

"I was hoping you would."

Suddenly, through the desert night air, Hannibal's scent – amber musk and masculine florals – came to him. Had to be close. He saw Matthew's nostrils quiver, a miniscule movement — but before he could turn his head, Will put his hands on either side of his face. "Kiss me," he requested, as earnestly as he could. "Please—"

The vampire leaned in with a satisfied little laugh and brought their mouths together. He tasted like old blood and it was all Will could do not to jerk his mouth away. The UnDead suddenly bit down on the corner of Will's mouth, a swift, stinging bite, and sucked on the wound for a moment.

He released Will in a hasty movement and stepped back, stopped by the verandah railing. Slowly, he lifted his hand to his mouth. "That's not human blood," he panted, a slow grin tugging up the corners of his mouth in a joyful, disbelieving sneer. "Oh, you—"

In a flash of metallic moonlight, Matthew's head separated from his shoulders. He must have been thirsty, because there was very little blood as the body twitched and fell, the head rolling for a moment along the railing before it pitched over the side. Will stepped forward to see where it fell, and was relieved to find the back patio empty, though the doors were open, emitting light and music from the party downstairs. The head rolled directly into some bushes, leaving a few smears of black blood but no other clue. It would burn in the sun the next morning.

Will turned to see Hannibal wiping down the blade of his sword, a satisfied half-smirk on his face. "So rude," he murmured, shaking his head.

Will scrubbed his mouth with the back of his hand and turned to spit on the body. "Ugh. God, get this fucking taste out of my mouth."

Hannibal smiled, a loving expression, and reached out to take the scarf, wrapping it around his hand.

"Hannibal, I swear to God—"

Hannibal pulled him in for a kiss that started out forcefully, but eased off into contented bliss. Will had his eyes closed, but he could feel Hannibal picking at the ruined silk, unknotting it and sliding it free of the collar's ring. Hannibal passed his tongue over the bite mark on the corner of Will's mouth, cleaning it so it could heal, which it did within moments, leaving a little bruising but nothing more.

"That's better," Will said, licking his lips.

"Are you ready?" Hannibal handed him his nine-inch tactical knife.

"What's the play?"

"Vivian's a good place to start, but the one with the ghostly eyes concerns me."

Will thought for a moment, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt and buttoning up his neck again. "I'll go in first and get close."

"More deception?" Hannibal raised an eyebrow. "You're becoming rather skilled, Will — I was almost jealous when I heard you talking to him just now."

Will smirked, shook his head. "If only he knew. You, ah… *definitely* have a firm hand."

“Firm enough to decapitate him.”

“Exactly.”

Hannibal pulled him close, into the shadow where Matthew had been hiding him. “Still, an air of authenticity doesn’t hurt.” He put his lips to Will’s throat, tasted the flesh with his tongue. Will made a small hum of pleasure, hands on Hannibal’s back and neck. The bite was swift but shallow, just enough to draw blood.

“Hurry, before it heals,” Hannibal suggested as Will stroked the cut of his cheekbone. “Be safe.”

Will smirked at him, then stumbled back into the gathering, a hand clamped over the wound on his neck. The vampires in the room snapped to predatory attention as the smell of his blood hit them. Good. The creepy one wasn’t far from the door. Will pretended to trip and fell on his knees at their feet as the rest of the human consorts stood up and put their backs against various corners and walls, ready for something bad to happen.

“He *bit* me,” Will managed through clenched teeth, reaching up to the pale creature with the spooky eyes as if for help. The bloodsucker took him by the wrist and helped him to his feet, eyes alight at the scent of his crimson. Will smiled, unable to help himself, and plucked the knife from where he’d tucked the sheath in the back of his pants. He brought the blade up through the bottom of the vampire’s jaw, penetrating the brain with the long blade. Black blood flowed from the corners of the creature’s eyes as Will pulled the knife free and tossed the immobilized vampire to the floor.

Several of the humans gasped or gave short shrieks of shock as Hannibal strode in and extended his sword arm. The blade pierced the mullet-wearer in the heart through his back. Hannibal spun, pulled it free, and struck his neck. The spray of blood hit the ceiling.

Will’s breath slammed out of his lungs as the redhead tackled him from the side, clawing at his face. The knife skittered out of his grasp just as Vivian ducked Hannibal’s swordplay and caught his arm and neck, flinging him back into the wall.

“I thought you looked familiar,” the redhead snarled, taking Will by the arms and forcing them to his sides. “Filthy Daywalker—”

One of the redhead’s own harem sprang out from behind the sectional and buried Will’s knife in her mistress’s back, abandoning the embedded blade. The vampire snarled, her grip failing. Will executed a reversal and slammed her back down so hard against the floor that the knife point erupted from her chest. Bloody froth exploded from her mouth. He bashed his fist against her face and reached behind to grab the weapon and slit her throat.

Vivian had Hannibal at her mercy on the floor, his sword arm pinned beneath her knee, her hands around his throat. She’d clawed his face, a snarl of his silver-ash hair twined her bloody fingers. “Bitch,” Will growled, snagging a full champagne bottle from the floor in one hand, flipping the knife in his other before resetting his grip.

He swung the bottle, shattering it against the side of her head. She roared in response, turning on him with blazing, unearthly eyes, fangs bared, but he was ready, driving the knife into her left ocular socket. Hannibal rolled free, snatched up the sword, and pierced it into her neck. He swept it to the side and half-decapitated her. She fell, blood pooling into the thick-pile carpet.

Silence. Heavy breathing. Slowly, the humans stood up, some splattered with gore. Will turned to the girl who had stabbed the redheaded vampire. “Thank you,” he said softly, offering her his hand. She stepped back, eyes wary, breath coming in little panicked bursts.

Will pulled a phone from his pocket and found the right number. “Jack. We’re done. Yeah. Okay.” He hung up.

Hannibal put his pocket square to the lacerations on his face. “If you’ll exit down the back stairs,” he instructed, “three limousines are waiting. You’ll be taken to a safe house where social services will help reunite you with your families.”

Breathy silence.

“Please.” Hannibal gestured elegantly at the door.

“You’re free,” Will said.

Silently, clutching one another, the humans filed out, some of them crying, others stone-faced, blank and numb. The last one shut the door behind herself. The party still raged downstairs, the music so loud that apparently no one noticed the yelling or banging around. All Hannibal and Will had to do now was drag the incapacitated vampires out onto the verandah to burn up in the sun, clean up any evidence, and leave. There was plenty of night left.

In the wake of slaughter, the silence was deafening. Will sank to his knees, rocked back on his heels, and emitted a long sigh of relief. “Fuck,” he breathed as Hannibal moved from one vampire body to the next, drinking them dry with delicate fang punctures to their wrists or necks, depending on what was left of them. This further incapacitated their foes and assured they wouldn’t heal up before dawn.

The afterglow of carnage surged through Will, the sweet aching wake of adrenaline and violence. He’d tried to tell himself he didn’t enjoy field work, but his body was screaming the opposite. The sprig of zest. The power. The righteousness was undeniable.

Hannibal cleaned his face delicately with his pocket square, then wiped down the weapons and sheathed them. He extended his hand to Will to pull him to his feet. “Still in one piece, beloved?”

“Barely a scratch.” Will watched as the gouges on Hannibal’s face pinched themselves shut, leaving red welts beneath smears of his maroon-black blood. He raised a hand, still quivering from adrenaline, and smoothed Hannibal’s hair to cover the small patch Vivian had ripped out during the fight. Desire reared in him suddenly, and dovetailed in the aftermath of the battle.

He grappled with it — the braided sensations confused him, felt conflated — but now Hannibal was walking across the room away from him. Will followed.

A door at the end of the salon opened to another softly-lit hallway lined with sterile-looking guest bedrooms. Some had no windows, clearly designed and built for vampire use. Hannibal led him into one at the end of the hall, abandoned their blades on an armchair, and disappeared into the en-suite bathroom to examine his face in the mirror.

Will was drawn to him by an inescapable magnetism. He crept over the plush carpet and onto the fresh tile to stand behind Hannibal. The vampire raised a dampened washcloth to his face to sponge away the residual blood. Will's hand stole onto Hannibal's hip, the other reaching around to unbutton his suit jacket. He slid it down Hannibal's shoulders and hung it on the towel rack, then pressed into him from behind, breathing him in, feeling the otherworldly power of his lover's preternatural physique. The months he'd spent denying his attraction to the very creature he'd been trained to kill had been torture. Right now, he was deeply grateful he'd given in.

Hannibal continued cleaning his face, actively ignoring Will, even as he traced his fingertips from the bottom of Hannibal's ear along the back of his neck, taking in the texture of the satin skin there, nuzzling the divot at the base of his hairline.

Will glanced at Hannibal's face in the mirror. The tiniest fiber, the thread of a smile signaled his victory. Will reached around him again, arms under his, and unbuttoned his torn, bloody shirt. One button at a time, with painstaking slowness, despite the rush of sensation to various parts of his body, his pounding pulse. He forced himself to be deliberate even as he multi-tasked, bowing his head to glide his lips along Hannibal's cool, velvety throat, beginning at his hairline and working his way down the ivoey curve.

He was tonguing the little divot where Hannibal's collarbone eased into his shoulder when Hannibal finally trembled under his touch, just the slightest tremor acknowledging his efforts. "Mr. Graham, are you trying to seduce me?" he inquired briskly as Will freed the last button.

"Just making sure you weren't still feeling jealous." Will caught Hannibal's hand that didn't have the bloody washcloth in it and kissed the back of his fingers, then thumbed open the cuff button. Hannibal ignored him, transferring the cloth to his other hand, rubbing gore from his pale eyebrow with businesslike strokes as Will freed the other sleeve. Will touched his fingertips, feather-light, on either side of Hannibal's neck, then drew them slowly down along the bow-shaped lines of his shoulders, slipping the bloodstained shirt along, whispering it over the pale, unblemished surface of his preternatural skin. The ruined garment collapsed in a heap on the tile. He was rewarded with a more obvious tremor this time, and a soft intake of breath as Hannibal's aristocratic lips parted just so, his body motionless.

"Is it working?" Will asked, gently drawing his touch around Hannibal's ribs and down, feeling the inhuman silk of his body hair, headed for his navel. He grazed the knuckles of the other hand along the slope of Hannibal's throat again, around the firm muscle of his shoulder and down his arm. Will pressed his mouth into Hannibal's neck, but so gently, his breath tickling along the curve of it once more, stirring a few fine hairs.

Hannibal folded the washcloth neatly on the edge the basin and turned to Will. “Do you think I can’t tell?” There was that fishing-line-thin twitch to his mouth that betrayed his concealed delight. Hannibal was a master of controlling his expressions, but Will knew all his tells. Part of it was the empathy, and the other was being in love with him.

“Can’t tell what?” He caught Hannibal’s waistband with one finger and tugged it, trying to draw them closer together.

When he put his palm to Hannibal’s sharply beautiful cheek, he caught Will’s wrist, arresting his motion. “My treasure — though I will never tire of exploring your body and its divine mysteries, I have gotten to know it very well.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Will teased, trying to pull his wrist free. No luck, but he was able to reach around and get a handful of backside with his free hand.

“The moment our mission was accomplished, and we were alone, I saw it.” Hannibal folded Will’s captured wrist against his chest, trapping it between them as Will pressed their hips together, pinning him back against the edge of the sink.

“Saw what, exactly?”

“Right after that door shut, that very moment — did you pause to reflect on the good you’d just done, the people you saved? I think not.”

“I don’t, ah…“

“Consider yourself a hero, I’m aware. You’ll have no judgment from me on that account. I prefer your villainous urges.”

Will tried to kiss him, but got a cheek instead. “Why are you talking so much?” he whispered along Hannibal’s jaw.

Hannibal released Will’s wrist to put his arms around him, playing with his hair, combing blood from the curls. “Do you want to know what I saw?”

“Mmm.” Will dipped in again to try and catch Hannibal’s mouth with his own, but only found his jawline. He settled for kissing the soft spot just below Hannibal’s rounded chin as he angled back and continued to evade him.

“Your pupils dilated. I heard your breath quicken, and your lips — they darkened, ever so slightly.” He paused to laugh softly as Will licked his earlobe. “The carnage of war has unmistakably called up a response in you, Will.”

“What kind of response?” Will finally caught Hannibal’s mouth, but the kiss was sweet, slow.

“This one.” Hannibal reached down and felt the unmistakable outline of his cock through the black clothing he wore.

Will sucked in a breath and let it out slowly. “‘Spose that’s kinda fucked up, huh?”

“I assume that when you hunted my kind alone this didn’t happen.”

“You assume, ah… correctly.” Will took Hannibal’s hands in his own and led him out of the bathroom and over to the impersonal bed. Hannibal allowed this, staring thoughtfully into Will’s eyes, which were still shrouded in the colored contacts. “You know how killing them makes me feel. Righteous.”

“But when we kill together…?”

Will pushed Hannibal gently onto the bed and stood before it. Hannibal arranged himself on his knees and put his fingers to work unbuttoning Will’s black dress shirt before sliding him free of it. “You’re just so good with that sword,” Will breathed as Hannibal undid his belt, allowing him to slither free of the rest of his clothing.

“I can feel the heat of that passion on your skin,” Hannibal told him as Will took him in his arms again. Hannibal caught him by the chin, one-handed. “Find it again. Call it to the surface, like it was in those moments where I saw your eyes change. I want to feel the burn of that instinct. Call it forth, beloved.”

Will did, the pendulum slicing across his mind, reliving the gloriously gory moments when the bloodsuckers had met their fate. And then he was on top of Hannibal, pinning him to the bed, burying his mouth against his, fangs be damned.

Something tugged around his neck. He tried to sit back quickly, but was stopped by the gold and diamond collar around his neck. Looking down, he saw that Hannibal had slipped the leash chain out of… somewhere, probably his trouser pocket, and had clipped it back onto the collar ring. “No,” Will growled in protest, reaching for it. Hannibal jerked it out of his reach with a patient smile and used it to bring their lips together again. Will crushed his mouth into Hannibal’s for several burning seconds before reaching behind to snag a handful of his hair, using it to yank Hannibal’s head back. “Take this thing off of me. Now.”

“No,” Hannibal said, trying to move out of his hold. Will used his own weight to press Hannibal back down onto the bed, firmly separating his knees with his own midsection, the hand in his hair twisting, the other locked around Hannibal’s grip on the chain.

Hannibal responded by gripping Will’s cock and administering a firm, intense teasing. Will inhaled sharply, then let his breath out and a sound of pleasure with it. His hold slipped bit by bit until Hannibal was able to pull his hand off of the chain and reclaim control of it. “Not fair,” Will half-complained.

Hannibal got up on his elbows, still holding the chain, beckoning Will farther back onto the bed with it, his other hand outstretched to caress him again. When his head reached the pillows that sat plump and waiting beneath the wrought iron headboard, he settled in beneath Will again, giving the chain a little pull and wandering his fingers’ exploration in a widening perimeter, pressing against his prostate from the outside, circling his entrance.

“Oh God,” Will whispered before burying his face into Hannibal’s neck, then demanding his mouth for a burning kiss.

“He’s not interested in helping you, sinner. He’s busy dropping churches on praying congregations,” Hannibal breathed into his ear before suddenly reversing their positions, using the element of surprise and brute force. Will let out a growl of frustration as Hannibal straddled him and looped the collar’s chain leash around one of the headboard’s slender bars.

The force of the new leverage wrenched Will’s head back, the collar digging into the soft flesh where his neck sloped into his chin, leaving his throat stretched and exposed. He sucked in air to protest, but then Hannibal was touching him again. “Keep still, beloved,” he advised, breath sliding over Will’s belly as he positioned himself lower, the end of the chain still in one hand.

Will had no choice but to obey, relax entirely at the threat of the teeth. Hannibal's free hand continued to explore with gentle firmness until Will’s muscles tensed just so under his touch. Hannibal teased his cock with his tongue, showing off his feral teeth, before nuzzling between Will’s legs, holding him open to eat him out, tongue making lazy circles before a series of firm, wet licks, the tip teasing into him, all while sliding Will’s cock through his fist. The crest crept along at a slow build until it peaked in a sudden unimaginable zenith, paired perfectly with the sudden razor blaze of Hannibal’s teeth in his thigh.

A hoarse moan tore from his throat as Will reached out with a sudden desperate hand and took a hold of the wrought iron bed frame. When his pleasure finally ebbed away, he realized he’d bent it into a distorted shape, left finger marks in the metal.

Hannibal mounted him, still holding the chain, keeping it taut as he went, edging Will’s chin up even further. He struggled to breathe even as he was desperate to, panting in the wake of the climax. He groped for Hannibal and found different parts of his body with burning fingers, his hips, ribs, muscled back, hair — then inhaled sharply as Hannibal breached him with the thick head of his cock. It hurt, of course – he wasn’t prepared for an easy experience, to be sure, but bodily pain was different now that he was more than human. The Daywalker, as the vampires called him.

As Hannibal thrust into him, he caught Will’s hand and bit the palm of it with another astonishingly swift penetration that braided pleasure and pain. The vampire bent over Will’s exposed throat now, kissing it with burning force, then biting down, drinking hard. Will’s heart struggled to keep up and his grip on Hannibal shook loose. Hannibal had to have been more than satisfied after drinking every last drop of those UnDead they’d dispatched tonight, but he’d said over and over that something about Beverly’s serum made Will’s blood the best he’d ever tasted.

Hannibal let the chain slip link by link through his fingers as he drank from Will, stopping only when he came, filling Will with his cool emission. At last, he pulled back, put his blood-hot lips against Will’s, and kissed him with coppery sweetness, slowness, unclasping the delicate hinge of the collar and sliding it and the chain free.

“There,” he said softly, tossing it onto a nearby pillow. “You’re free, beloved.”

Will brought up a hand to gingerly feel the marks the metal left behind as Hannibal molded himself tightly against his side, resting his head against Will’s blood-smeared chest, an arm around his midsection.

Will sighed.

“What is it, darling?”

Will smiled faintly up at the nondescript cream colored ceiling, trying to catch his breath. “Well, now I… kind of miss it.”

“I could put it back on.”

“Would you?”

Hannibal reached over him to snag the collar and chain again. He eased the metal ring around Will’s half-massacred throat and snapped the clasp again. Hannibal toyed with the chain and handle, running his fingers over it.

“You can wear it next time,” Will suggested with an exhausted smirk.

He found himself drifting off in the wake of Hannibal’s feeding and the afterglow of sex and violence. Hannibal kissed his forehead and got out of bed. “I’ll handle the cleanup,” he suggested, pulling his pants back on.

“You sure?”

Hannibal’s response was to stroke his tangled hair and run his fingertips along the edge of the collar.

“Love you…” Will murmured before slipping under.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> Will and Hannibal are safe back at the Daylight Inc base and enjoying some alone time when they're interrupted by contractors coming to work on the old theater. Up in the projection room, they have to be very, very quiet...

Baltimore, October 2013

They'd left the candles on.

Not that it mattered. They were fake. LED flames that undulated to look like fire. Much safer for a firetrap old movie theater.

Will stretched briefly, one leg stiffening out from beneath the tangled sheets. It was a little before 5pm, or so the clock said. The shorter days made it a lot easier to be on Hannibal's schedule. Only one hour until sunset.

They'd gotten in from another mission late last night, or early, depending on one's perspective. This field trip was for reconnaissance instead of murder, but just like last time, their quarry was one step ahead of them. Mason Verger had slipped through their fingers again.

After the debriefing, with daylight threatening, he'd elected to spend the night with Hannibal in what Will called his hidey-hole – the projection room of the old theater connected to Daylight Inc., the faded palace Will was slowly restoring to its original grandeur. The windowless room had a queen bed with luxurious sheets, a nightstand, and an armoire with a few of Hannibal's spare clothes within. And fake candles to set the mood.

Will rolled on his side and found Hannibal still asleep next to him, though he'd shifted a few inches away in slumber. Their legs were still touching, but the vampire slept on his back, one arm tucked against his side, the other thrown out toward the opposite edge of the bed. He was horrifically still when he slept, his breathing almost imperceptible, though Will had gotten used to it at this point.

Hannibal's profile was pleasingly disheveled, and while sleeping, he always looked so harmless. Will loved it when his hair was less than perfect, like it was now, falling over his forehead and fluffed up on one side. He studied the curve of Hannibal's plush lips and the shape of his motionless mouth, then the lines of his neck, where they intersected at the clavicle, and the broad expanse of chest, the inhumanly glossy curls that covered it.

Will felt his cock twitch, and smirked in the dark to no witness. *You'd think we'd slow down for a minute* , he thought. *We have time* . Still, habits were habits. They were used to stealing every second they were together, of being saturated with one another, feasting after famine. But they were home now. True, soon enough there would be another mission, and depending on the nature of it, Will might have to go alone. But they'd just gotten back – surely Jack wouldn't send them out again right away. What was the rush now?

The rush was blood, headed to the same place it always went when he looked at Hannibal for too long. Will's body was raw with amorous bite marks, and he was exhausted from the days of hard travel and long nights of surveillance. And yet… he sat up, supported by one elbow, his muscles protesting, pulse pounding in his temples. The desire overrode it all, somehow.

Slowly, he drifted his body over Hannibal's sleeping form, slid a leg between his. One hand against the bed, the other flowed down Hannibal's body, starting with forehead, along the hairline, then down, an inch at a time, brushing his neck, the rise of his chest, then down over his ribs, coming to rest at the bow of his back. Will bent the arm that was supporting him, though it quivered with the effort, and put his lips on Hannibal's immobile mouth, gently at first, and then with more force.

Hannibal stirred after a moment, and his blood-maroon eyes opened sleepily. Will broke the kiss but remained nose-to-nose with him. "Mornin'," he whispered. "Or, wait… evening."

"And *bonsoir* to you," Hannibal whispered back, a smile climbing his cool, aristocratic features. As drained and exhausted as Will was, it was heaven to see Hannibal so well-fed, flushed, pliable, beautiful, alive.

"I have something for you." Will shifted Hannibal's hips to meet his so he could feel the shape of his desire.

"Again? As a physician, I'd advise against it." Will silenced him with his lips again for a few moments, knowing his protests were just a way to tease him further.

"What, are you sick of me or something?" Will's words were muffled as he shoved his face into Hannibal's neck and pulled his tongue down to the hollow of his throat, then put his teeth over his nipple, just for a second. It stiffened in response and Will knew he'd won. He yanked Hannibal's hips back up again, pressing them into himself, then inhaled to say something like, *y'know, being this sexy is an arrestable offense in this county* when Hannibal suddenly clamped a hand over his mouth. Will tried to speak but Hannibal squeezed his teeth and jaw painfully and used the other hand to put a finger to his lips.

"Do you hear that?" Hannibal whispered.

Will let go of Hannibal and rolled onto his back as Hannibal released his mouth. He sat up and cocked his head. There were footsteps below them, men's boots on the stage floor, and muffled voices.

"Fuck," Will complained, slapping a hand over his eyes. "It's Duane and the guys." He rolled over and grabbed his phone. "He was gonna call me if he could get in earlier to start sanding. Looks like I missed it." He glanced over at the projection room door and noted that he'd

remembered to dead-bolt it from the inside. But the window where the projector had once been positioned to cast its light out onto the screen was perpetually open, looking out over the auditorium and stage.

Hannibal ran his hand over Will's chest and down between his legs. "This makes your situation difficult," he breathed into Will's ear as he exhaled, eyes closed, twining his hand into Hannibal's disheveled hair.

A snatch of conversation came through the vent. "...car's here, but I ain't seen him — maybe he's staying with—" This was cut off by the sudden whirring of the floor sander. Masked by the sound, Hannibal smirked and slid over to kiss him. Then, without warning, the sound died, and Duane let out a long string of muffled curse words. It fired up, then off, then up again.

"Fuck," Will hissed again and Hannibal clamped a hand over his mouth once more.

"Shh," he warned.

"I should go down there—"

"Oh, of course you should," Hannibal teased in a half-whisper, stroking Will's hard length where it was pressed near his own.

"You are not helping!" he rasped, rolling away. Hannibal grabbed him by the arm and rolled him back, stifling his lips with his own, climbing onto his hips to pin him down.

" *Beloved* . Quiet now." Hannibal's words slipped over his lips and into Will's ear, just loud enough to be heard. Will felt sweat gather on his brow as he took several deep breaths. Hannibal took the opportunity to forcefully guide his hands back, one at a time, to strap them into the cuff restraints they kept at the head and footboards. Will wondered absently how long it'd be before they broke this set, too. Preternatural strength would do that. Hannibal slid off of him and teased open the bedside drawer of his nightstand.

Voices came through the projector window from the auditorium below. "Yeah you fuckin' did, Kevin, now flip the breaker and try it again." The metallic squeal of the breaker box, which was at the bottom of the stairs leading up to the hidey-hole. Hannibal touched him with lubed fingers, drifting back further and massaging his perineum, circling his entrance.

Will sucked in breath to make some kind of sound, but Hannibal was quicker, clamping his hand over his mouth again as they listened to the steps retreat back down to the stage. "That was close," he whispered. "It seems you can't be trusted, my treasure."

"Hannibal," Will tried to say into his palm.

"Hush," Hannibal warned him, catching his chin in an iron grip. "You'll scandalize the help. And you know how peasants gossip."

Will laughed as silently as he could. Hannibal took advantage of his open mouth to slip a strip of red silky fabric around and between his teeth, looping it twice and tying it against the

back of his head, just tight enough to hurt. Will tried to speak, but could only utter a few muffled syllables as Hannibal completed the task and took a moment to run his thumb from the base of Will's chin down his neck to the divot in his throat and rest the pad there as he inched up to put his lips against the gag.

"When I was a mortal creature," Hannibal said so softly that Will had to strain to hear it, "the measure of a man's beauty was a well-formed leg."

He eased backward and made his way down toward Will's feet, tracing his fingers along the lines of his defined thighs as he went. Hannibal picked up one of his feet and kissed it softly, then moved his lips over to the ball of his ankle, caressing it with his tongue before prodding it with one fang, breaking the skin and drinking. Will strained against the cuffs. The pain was excruciating, and in a place he'd never considered before.

Hannibal spread Will's legs further, and Will didn't resist him, only quivered under his touch as Hannibal used one hand to stroke his cock with maddeningly variable speeds while moving his mouth up the rise of Will's calf.

Hannibal slipped two fingers into him now and massaged against the sweet rise within, teasing him relentlessly with the points of his fangs and the increasing speed of his touch. Penetration and penetration, good God — Will strained against the cuffs and the chains bolted into the bedframe, arching his back as Hannibal slid his teeth into the meat of his calf and increased the fervor of his fingers.

Will could faintly hear sounds coming from his lungs, but they were so muffled by the gag and the intermittent whirring of the floor sander that nobody would be the wiser. Probably. The threat of being discovered was pretty fucking hot too, as much of a pain as it would be to find another floor refinishing crew and possibly having to kick the shit out of some homophobes.

Hannibal wounded him shallowly, visually savoring the taste and playing up Will's convoluted connection between pain and pleasure. He edged Will closer and closer to climax with his touches and a series of searing little bites up the inside of his thigh from knee nearly to groin. The sensation vibrated along every nerve in Will's body as if all of them sang together, hitting the same high note. Hannibal sensed it and immediately backed off, sitting up between Will's legs, head cocked, his expression maddeningly amused as the contractors continued to hang around. "Yeah, well, sounds like they need Jesus," one said, and his friend replied, "Oh yeah, Kevin, like we didn't all see you tossing dollar bills at strippers at the Lumber Yard last weekend when your wife was outta town."

Hannibal smiled and licked a spot of Will's blood from one of his plush lips, a fang flashing momentarily in the faux candlelight. Will shook with silent laughter, even through the sweet ache of unrelease, the result of Hannibal's cruel edging. The vampire touched him again and Will exhaled into the gag, throwing his head back.

Will tossed his sweaty hair out of his eyes as Hannibal mounted him at the hips, gazing down at him with tender eyes and a pleased, almost pitying half-smile, a cat with the canary trapped. After helping himself to a palmful of warming lube, Hannibal lifted himself,

positioned his lover, then eased his way down onto Will's cock. Vampires weren't as warm inside as humans, but damn…!

Will was desperate, almost to the point of being dangerous, to free his hands and touch his lover, have even the smallest say in the rhythm and how deep. The restraints were good, though, highest quality, industrial grade, meant for prisons. The thick cuffs meant he couldn't pop out his thumb, which was by design. But dear God — and Hannibal was so fucking beautiful like that, riding him, hair spilling over his forehead, moving at first slowly then building up the speed with effortless movements of his gorgeous thick thighs — God, he was so fucking *tight* …!

Hannibal tensed around him suddenly and Will lost all sense of time and space. Pleasure surrounded him like a nebula cradling a constellation. He felt like he wasn't getting enough air, his head swimming, the bites on his leg and thigh bursting with pain and fire.

Darkness.

He came back to himself in increments.

False candlelight. A slight breeze, warm – the space heater. His hands were numb, and his leg ached, even more sharply when he moved. He groaned as he turned his head to the side, but it was muffled — the gag was still on his mouth, soaked in his spit, tied achingly right over his lips and jaw. Hannibal was nowhere to be seen, and the door to the projection booth was open.

He tried to move, using his good leg to push himself up higher on the pillows. The restraints dug into his wrists and the chains rattled faintly as he shifted with a muffled groan.

Hannibal appeared in the doorway with a preternatural suddenness. He was freshly washed, dressed in dark pants and a crisp olive shirt, sleeves rolled up in perfectly careful carelessness, hair combed and styled neatly. Too beautiful, especially with the way he glowed in the wake of Will's enhanced blood.

He had a plate with him, which he brought to the bedside and set on the nightstand. Sinking down onto the edge of the bed, he put a hand on Will's chest and gazed into his eyes, head slightly cocked, a self-satisfied smile on his face. "The floor men are gone. They've finished one side of the stage already. It's very smooth. It'll be beautiful once you stain it with that mahogany color."

Will tried to speak.

"Pardon me, darling, what was that?"

"You little shit," Will tried to say, but it was, of course, unintelligible.

"Forgive me," Hannibal said, though his smirk remained. Will bowed his head so Hannibal could reach behind and ease the knots enough to slip the gag free and kiss him gently. "Now, what were you trying to say, beloved?"

“Oh, nothing.” Will’s voice was raspy, his throat achingly dry. “Just remarking on you, ah… looking good enough to eat.”

“You always look like that to me,” Hannibal smirked. “You’ve treated me to breakfast in bed so many days in a row — I thought I’d return the favor for once.”

“Breakfast, lunch, supper, midnight snack…” Will reminded him with a twinge of irony.

“Indeed.” Hannibal set the plate in Will’s lap — cut fruit and a piece of toast with butter and honey. Hannibal couldn’t eat, but the science of cooking had always interested him, and Daylight Inc. enjoyed the results. “ *Bon appetit.* ”

“Looks great.” Will shot him a wry glance and rattled his restraints faintly.

“Of course,” Hannibal said with another smirk. Will tried to glower, but he couldn’t keep a straight face. Carefully, Hannibal unstrapped Will, one hand at a time, and handed him a bottle of water as well.

“I love you,” Will said around his toast.

“I treasure you, beloved,” Hannibal replied. “But you need a few days to recover. Rest.”

“You think you can keep your hands off me for that long?”

“I could ask you the same thing.”

Will winked at him and put a strawberry in his mouth. “Guess we’ll see.”

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> Will sneaks off to buy Hannibal a Valentine's Day present, and runs into a pack of vampires. Unarmed and alone, he faces the very real possibility of not surviving the encounter.
>
> Hannibal is a fox hearing the rabbit scream. He comes running... to help? We'll see.

Venice, February, 2014

Luca took the bills from Will's hand and watched him shake out a cigarette and settle down into the back of the small speedboat.

"Why isn't Mario taking you?" the young man asked, referring to the usual boatman that ran Hannibal and Will between the island where they were staying and Venice proper. Staying, hiding out, whatever. When you offed ancient vampires for a living, sometimes you had to let the heat die down before getting back in the saddle, facing one way or the other. The little vacation had been a welcome respite.

"None of your business," Will said. Damn it, this kid asked too many questions. How long before he noticed Hannibal never walked in the sunlight?

Luca shot him a glare over his shoulder with furious brown eyes. "You don't have to be an asshole. I'm doing you a favor."

"Let's go." Will managed to light a cigarette before Luca got them up to top speed, the balmy wind whipping around them as the boat cut across the water. They shared a sullen silence all the way to Venice, even as he tied off the boat Will got out. "Look," he said, softer now. "I appreciate the ride. I'm just, ah… I dunno. Stressed."

Luca shrugged. "Thought you were on vacation. No stress."

Will put his hands in his pockets against the wind.

Luca looked at him now, smiled. "Trouble in paradise?"

Will deliberately ignored his question. "Shouldn't be long." He turned and went up the dock and onto the streets of Venice, searching for the little camera shop whose address he'd memorized.

Night had fallen. Hannibal was going to realize before long that he wasn't home from his walk. The plan was to be there and back before he'd be missed, his surprise in tow.

Damn. Sign on the camera store's door said "Back in 10 Minutes." In Italian time, that could be ten minutes or an hour. He waited for the first five, smoking, loitering, then got too restless and decided to walk a bit.

And suddenly he felt them. Four, no, five vampires. Close, getting closer. He turned his head sharply towards the canal and saw the water taxi pulling up. They were dressed up, headed somewhere, not from around here. Shit. He was completely in the open with no weapons. Will sped up his pace without being noticeable and turned his head to the side, hoping they wouldn't — shit, he needed the pendulum to hide himself from them, cloak his own mental presence, and he had to concentrate…

The group disembarked, leaving the dock and stepping onto the ancient stones. And they were following him now, whispering furiously amongst themselves, three men and two women. *I can't believe I just got fucking made,* his brain snarled, *now of all times.*

Will's mind raced as he walked, sticking to heavily trafficked routes. *Stay in populated areas. They couldn't risk an attack in front of a pack of tourists.* Until they did. If they made him for the Daywalker, no number of witnesses would be enough to deter them. Five, he could take five, couldn't he?

With no weapons? He scoffed under his breath. And he was out of practice. At least he'd been staying in shape with the ocean swims, trying to keep up with Hannibal. But that was no substitute for hard combat training.

Well, death was death, and he'd faced it before. Hannibal always said he found death comforting, that the thought that his life could end at any moment freed him to fully appreciate the beauty and art and horror of everything this world had to offer. Not that Hannibal had much to worry about, having kicked around on earth for centuries.

Will knew that by doing this work, he risked the ultimate sacrifice. But the deaths of humans he couldn't abide. Luca, if he tried to get back to the boat, of the staff that came with Hannibal's rented villa, Mario and Catarina, if he led the vampires back to the island. The bloody demise of a shopkeeper if he tried to use a phone — it wasn't worth it. He had to get them somewhere isolated and take his chances.

As the group of glitterati UnDead followed him away from the populated districts, away from the tourists and the shops, they increased their pace to catch up with him. Wouldn't be long now. Well, he could choose the turf at least. Down a darkened, narrow street of closed storefronts, Will found a courtyard that was fenced off, the buildings surrounding it all undergoing renovation, scaffolding clinging to their crumbling edifaces, the workers finished for the day. Seemed deserted enough.

He veered off suddenly from the alley and turned the corner, then hooked his foot into the chainlink fencing. Within part of a second he crested the top and dropped from what the average human might consider a dizzying height, tucking and rolling as his training had imprinted in him, and getting to his feet.

Not a second too soon. As he stood, he heard the distinctive thumps of the vampires jumping the fence and landing on the other side with him. The biggest of the men went for him immediately, reaching to grab Will from behind, but all he earned for his effort was an elbow directly in the nose, smashed flat against his face in a spurt of dark blood.

The taller dark-haired woman tried next, leaping over her injured friend to try and tackle Will, flinging her fur coat and purse to the side. He used her own momentum against her, executing a throw that sent her face-first into a metal scaffold that rang with the impact. Another male tried his luck and failed almost comically, taking Will by the lapels of his jacket and moving in with his teeth, only to have Will catch him by the jaw with one hand and smash him in the groin with his knee before slamming him on the ground to deliver a kick to the face.

The last two, man and woman, both blondes, wised up and changed tactics, coming at him from different directions. He managed to miss the woman's clawing fingernails, but the man grabbed him by his hair and one wrist, shoving it up against his back. She came at him with her fanged mouth open but he swung his left hook and connected soundly, dropping her to her knees with the force. The one holding him dragged him a few steps to a metal staircase that wound up to the terrace of one of the homes being renovated, and bashed his head into it. Dazed, Will felt blood running down his temple as he struggled to free himself.

The bitch he'd thrown into the scaffolding was there suddenly with a pair of handcuffs. They were bedazzled with some kind of gems, but were strong enough to secure his arms above his head to the metal of the staircase. Somewhere in the disassociating part of his mind, he wanted to laugh. Who carried handcuffs around like that? Then the devastating thought. Hannibal would have liked them, probably called them adorable, probably would have kept them somewhere silly like the glove compartment of his Bentley, pulled them out at some unexpected time as a surprise.

Hannibal.

Please, God, goddess, anyone — let me see him again — just once —

He could have kept fighting, but he didn't. He closed his eyes and waited for the end.

They didn't attack, instead backing off hurriedly, out of reach of his feet. Even though Will knew he was in trouble, it was still satisfying to see how badly he'd managed to injure them before succumbing to their greater numbers. His senses kicked into overdrive now that he'd edged back from the precipice of death-acceptance.

He was clever and vicious, as Hannibal always said. These bloodsuckers didn't know what he was capable of, and he was going to kill them all. Be easier with a weapon—

"I can't believe this," one of them started in German. "It's the Daywalker. We have the Daywalker!"

"Stop fucking around and kill him!"

“No. Do you have any idea how much he’s worth? If we take him alive we can sell him to the highest bidder. We can live off the proceeds into the next two centuries.”

“No.” The biggest male stepped forward and smashed his fist into Will’s face, then backed off before he could be kicked. “We take him back to Baltimore. We kill him on the very spot where the Dragon died and we do it in his honor.”

Will waited until they were fully engaged in their squabble before popping his thumb out of its socket. He eased his hand free of the cuff before cracking it back into place. One of them looked over just in time to see Will lunge to the side beneath the staircase, roll, and pick up the discarded masonry trowel. That didn’t save the blonde, who had her back to him. He grabbed her by the hair, yanked her head back, and stabbed the trowel into her throat, cutting from side to side, hitting vertebrae. Blood clouded in the air, black in the moonlight. He planted a foot in the small of her back and launched her at her friends. She slammed into the other woman and they fell to the ground in a bloody tangle.

The blond male came at him, another bloodsucker in tow, but he ducked their attacks easily. The brunette woman, smeared in the blood of her friend, tackled him from behind, but he reversed their positions and buried the trowel in her neck, sweeping out to the side and nearly severing her head from her body.

One of them grabbed him by the back of the shirt and flung him off of the woman. He skidded along the cobblestones, his leather jacket protecting most of his body but not the small of his back where it rode up. He could feel the burn of a long scrape of road rash, but that was trivial compared to the fangs that were headed for him. The vampire straddled him, put his hands around his throat…

Hannibal?

For a second there, Will was sure he’d sensed his lover’s presence, but didn’t have time to consider it. He brought the makeshift weapon up again and drove it into the vampire’s side, below his ribcage, angled up. This caused the vampire to lose his grip, and Will threw him off just right so that he impaled himself on the broken scaffolding, a twisted metal pole piercing up through his back, bisecting his heart.

Two to go. The big one caught him with a fist in the kidney and snagged his hair, driving a knee into his face. Then he was on the ground with a foot stamped down on his sternum.

Will tried to hook a leg around the guy’s knee, but the UnDead slammed him in the side with his foot once, twice, three times. Will struggled for breath as his assailant stepped down hard on his neck. The other was staring stupidly at the bodies of their friends. “Damn near took her head off!” he shouted, panic saturating his voice.

Will stabbed the trowel into the big one’s calf. The man roared in pain and pulled his leg away, unfortunately taking the tool with it. Will rolled and got to his feet, but the other one had conquered his fear and was suddenly there, reaching down to snag a piece of the broken scaffolding to wield like a bat. Will was able to dodge the first three times, but the fourth swing caught him in the ribs and knocked him into a wall where it was promptly slammed into his eyebrow. The creature pressed the bar into his throat and snarled, baring his fangs.

Instead pushing the bar, Will let his windpipe go flat and reached for the twisted face in front of him. Hooking his fingers into the man's mouth, one hand against the soft palate, the other locked around his lower teeth, he ignored the cutting of his own flesh and tore as hard as he could. He was rewarded with the satisfaction of nearly pulling the jaw free from the man's head. His attacker went limp and fell at his feet.

His buddy was ready for a turn, though. He came at Will with the masonry trowel, but was rewarded with a dodge and the piece of metal scaffolding shoved hard into one eye. The vampire went down, sucking in breath to scream, but Will fell with him, and shoved his bleeding hand over the vampire's mouth. Reclaiming the trowel, he stabbed down through the heart, once, twice. The vampire seized and grew still.

The other was struggling to hold what was left of his jaw against his face. Will rose slowly from the immobile body and turned to him. The man gurgled, terrified. In the heart again this time, three quick jabs of his makeshift blade. And then it was over.

Breaths ripped through Will's throat and down his lungs as he sank to his knees amid the bodies. Blood was on his clothes, and coming from him, his mouth and the cut on the side of his head. His ribs ached and something had snapped in his knee.

Hannibal.

He looked up, tossing his hair out of his eyes. There was the unmistakable pale face framed with the perfectly-coiffed maple-gray hair. Hannibal was on top of one of the buildings, kneeling on the edge, looking down at him like some kind of gargoyle. After a moment he dropped from the height and landed without needing to cushion the fall with a roll, merely straightening from his crouch and coming to Will's side.

"Took you long enough," Will couldn't help but say as Hannibal took him by the arm and helped him stand. One glance at Hannibal's face made his veins go white. His lover was absolutely furious with him, frosty with it, his eyes snapping maroon fire.

Hannibal snatched him by the chin and squeezed his wrist so hard Will grunted in pain. "What," he asked, voice calm and cool but threaded through with an unknowable fury, "were you thinking? Why did you leave the island without my knowledge?"

"Han—"

"Were you trying to *leave* ?" he snarled, the grip on Will's jaw tightening. Will wrapped his free hand around Hannibal's wrist and tried in vain to loosen his hold, his other wounds shrieking in agony. "Leave *me* ?"

"No!" he shouted into Hannibal's face, the after-effects of the battle, the surge of adrenaline so close to the surface bubbled forth again. "It's almost fucking *Valentine's Day* !"

Hannibal's grip relaxed so suddenly Will lost his balance and fell on the blood-slicked cobblestones. He flipped on his back and edged away until he was out of reach.

“I came into town to buy you something. It’s supposed to be a *surprise* .” Will lifted the sleeve of his flannel to his mouth and swiped at the blood, then struggled to his feet.

Hannibal just looked at him for a long moment. His expression was terrifyingly blank but Will knew his tiniest giveaways now that they’d been together this many months. He was thinking, rapidly, according to the minuscule quiver of his eyebrow.

“What, you were s-so *furious* with me, actually thought I would leave w-without saying goodbye, that you didn’t, ah… didn’t *intervene* ?” Will wiped blood from his eyebrow to keep it from running into his eye. The sensation of the cloth against the wound stung maddeningly. “Would you have let them *kill* me?” The question rang out between the crumbling buildings.

Hannibal was on him then, spun him around, held him easily with one arm across his chest. He used his other hand to stifle Will’s accusations, clamping it over his mouth. “Someone will hear. Investigate and find us in a pile of what appear to be murder victims.”

Will struggled against him for a stretch of time before the pain in his ribs and leg became too much. His strength faded and he gave it up, knowing Hannibal would always be stronger.

Once he was subdued, Hannibal turned him around so they could face one another, Will gripping his arm for support. “You had to know how I would perceive your actions. Bribing Luca to take you away from the island without my knowledge, tricking Mario into going to the village for candles.” His cold, serpentine voice grew steadily more infected with emotion. “You had to know I would fear rejection, or that Mason Verger’s people had found you.“

Will threw off his hold. Hannibal let him take a step back, watched him cradle his side with a grimace. “You really think I would do that? That we’d have a couple o-of little, ah… disagreements, a lovers’ quarrel or two, and I’d up and leave? What kind of… *monster* do you think I am that I would treat you like that?” His core burned, his voice dripping with fury but expressed only in harsh whispers against the threat of discovery. “Do you trust me at all, or do you really think — I mean, really, deep down — that I am no better than a child, that I would just get bored or something and decide to… after all we’ve been through…?”

“You’ve deliberately made decisions in the past to push me away. When I first came to Jack, you insisted on ignoring your feelings for me. You punished *me* for how you felt, Will. And you had to know — you must have known — that even if I didn’t leap to such a dire conclusion at the discovery of your absence that I would, at the very least, worry about you. A worry that was warranted, it seems.” He gestured to the bodies around them.

“That still doesn’t explain why you didn’t help me,” Will hissed, swiping a contrail of blood from his split eyebrow with the meat of his thumb. “What the *fuck* were you waiting for?”

Hannibal took a breath that quivered through his aristocratic lips. He looked up at the sky, as if for guidance, a tremble of vulnerability cracking across his coldly beautiful features. “I never would have let them take you or kill you.” Pause. “I was curious. I wanted… to see what would happen. Your fighting was captivating. And – in the moment, I thought you needed to learn a valuable lesson.”

“For fuck’s sake, Hannibal!”

“Will.” Hannibal’s eyes glittered a predatory glow. “I could express the same sentiment.”

“You deliberately let them hurt me. And you don’t trust me.” Will grimaced as he tried to turn and walk back toward the fence.

Hannibal stepped forward in a swift movement and caught him, spinning him to press their bodies together, catching him by the chin again. Will tried to push him but Hannibal grabbed the empty handcuff link hanging from Will’s arm and twisted it. Will inhaled sharply in pain. “And you,” Hannibal stated icily, “should know by now how deeply I care for you and how frantic I would be. You should have considered it.”

Will tried to toss his head back, but Hannibal wouldn’t let go. “Possessive, cold-hearted bastard,” Will accused.

“Insufferable, selfish, senseless child,” Hannibal growled back.

Will felt his anger spike, dovetail with his weariness and pain, and it barreled through his body, coalescing in a very unexpected place. He noted a similar subtle change in Hannibal’s expression, but surely he was angry and—

Simultaneously, they crushed their mouths together in a passion-fueled kiss, spiked with fury and adrenaline, with guilt and shame, with love and obliteration. Will’s hands snarled into Hannibal’s hair and Hannibal’s arms locked around him in an unyielding grip, tight enough to make his already bruised ribs ache desperately.

They broke apart and stared each other down, faces inches apart.

“You think this is going to make me forgive you?” Will growled.

“Likewise. Though you've been known to use your body to get what you want, haven’t you?”

“Fuck you, Hannibal.” Will’s growl swiftly descended into a half-moan as Hannibal touched him between his legs momentarily.

“Exactly,” Hannibal hissed into his ear before he buried their mouths together again, deep, deeper, then surfacing, then—

Will whipped his head back, a stream of red trickling from between his lips. “You bit me.”

“I know,” Hannibal replied simply before locking his mouth over Will’s again, then abandoning it to feverishly kiss, tongue, suck at his neck from chin to nape.

“Get off me,” Will protested breathlessly.

Hannibal gave his maddeningly mild smile and twisted Will’s arms behind his back, again using the remaining cuff for leverage. Bearing Will with him, he shouldered open the door to one of the empty buildings. The interior was dusty, full of debris and sawhorses. In the corner

of the room was a large sturdy table where someone had unrolled some blueprints. Hannibal pushed Will in this direction.

Will expected to be bent over it immediately, but Hannibal spun him and lifted so he was sitting on it instead with Hannibal's hips between his legs.

The vampire's grip softened, and he caressed Will's face with a lingering, loving touch, fingering the bruises and cuts, brushing his sweaty, bloody hair back. The building was quiet, the bodies of the UnDead assailants still undiscovered, the city settling in for the night. All Will could hear with any surety was the cadence of Hannibal's breathing and the rush of heart and blood that nearly deafened him.

"You are like a hapless prince in a story," Hannibal said softly, though his words were bitter. "Beautiful but cruel, the kind of man that would refuse shelter the enchantress in disguise and be turned into a beast." He pressed his cool lips gently into Will's feverish neck, hands on his thighs and moved along his stomach beneath the stained shirt.

"So what does that make you?" Will snarled his fingers in Hannibal's now-disheveled hair and pulled his face away to look him in the eyes. "The witch or the princess?"

"It makes me *miserable* ," Hannibal admitted through gritted teeth. "My love for you has made me pathetic and vulnerable…"

Will couldn't stand to hear the rest and brought their lips together again, bloody, fiery, insistent. "Then maybe I *should* have left," he panted as he pulled back after several thrilling moments. He hooked the heel of one shoe into the back of the other and flung it off, then freed his other foot. The shoes fell to the cracked tiles with hollow thuds. "If all I'm doing here is making you miserable."

"Your absence would be worse by multitudes." Hannibal somehow was already half undressed in the abandoned gloom. He tore open Will's shirt, scattering buttons, only to emit a growl of frustration finding a black undershirt beneath. Will hurriedly wiggled out of the subtle plaid flannel and yanked the tee shirt over his head as Hannibal undid his jeans.

The vampire feverishly kissed and sucked at the skin of Will's neck, biting intermittently, hard enough to draw blood, moving down along his shoulder, over his nipple, then across his abdominals before lunging back up to his mouth. He lifted Will easily by the hips and pushed him back farther on the drafting table, then climbed on after him, boxing him underneath.

Will propped himself up on his elbows to kiss him again, reaching down to stroke the bulge of Hannibal's cock through the fine fabric of his trousers. "Why?" he demanded.

"What are you asking?" Hannibal said around the kiss he was applying to Will's throat, tongue teasing over his Adam's apple.

"Why do you love me?" The last word was contorted in a sigh as Hannibal slipped a cool finger inside him, his preternatural chill a balm to the burning intrusion.

“How could I not? You have rendered me powerless.” Hannibal brought their lips together again, then backed off as Will writhed beneath him, one hand clawing at Hannibal’s shoulder that was still clothed in a soft blue Oxford. Hannibal had Will’s other hand pinned to the table, leaning his weight on it for leverage as he spit on his hand and slid another finger into Will’s hole, searching for his sweet spot and finding it with practiced confidence. Will felt a deep thrill of satisfaction. He loved it when Hannibal was vulgar, the polished veneer cracking open.

“I need… to know… why.” Will breathed each word individually. “You’ve seen me at my absolute worst. I’m damaged and it’s like you said — when I go down I bring other people — with me — oh God — H-Hannibal…!’

Without warning, Hannibal pulled his fingers out and administered a stinging bite to his pectoral that bled an unexpected amount. Turning Will on his stomach roughly, he pulled Will’s hips up where he wanted them, then shoved his head down, his other arm wrapped around Will’s midsection in a possessive grip that almost made it hard to breathe.

His entrance was painful, and Will had the sensation he was being split apart. But there was the ascending pleasure that braided itself with this pain until they were one precious, exquisite feeling. Hannibal fucked him hard, holding him as if they were sure to be flung apart any second, pumping Will’s cock through his fist with each thrust. Their grunts and mewls echoed through the dusty emptiness of the half-ruined house.

Will’s mounting climax peaked, and Hannibal sank his teeth into the muscle just below the back of his neck, next to the shoulder blade. It was a poor place to gather blood but that wasn’t the aim. The teeth brought with them a burning anguish at just the right moment. Will muffled his mouth against his own forearm, delivering a bite of his own, though it would do nothing but bruise in the shape of his teeth.

Hannibal’s thrusts quickened until he finished, filling Will with the eerily cool sensation of his emission. There was heavenly relief as he pulled out, but a kind of void as well. Hannibal, panting, turned him over again and positioned him gently so he could lie on the table. Will turned on his side, cradling his head against his arm, and concentrated on breathing.

Everything hurt. There was no thrill of taking out five vampires on his own with a fucking masonry trowel, which normally would have provided a certain satisfaction. This felt like a defeat. He closed his eyes and listened to the quiet rustling of Hannibal getting dressed.

A cool hand on his thigh. Will kept his eyes shut. “There is a hotel near here. I will return as quickly as I can. We shouldn’t linger.”

Will didn’t answer, didn’t move.

“You need to get dressed. As presentable as you can. Will.”

He opened his eyes. Hannibal helped him sit, took his damp face in his cool hands. “Did you hear what I said?”

“Yeah, I heard you.”

Hannibal leaned in to kiss him, hands on his face, but Will turned his head. Hannibal froze for an agonized moment, then dropped his hands, turned, and left.

***

There was already a bottle of good red wine in the room when they arrived, Hannibal supporting Will with one arm, opening the door with the other. The little table also held two glasses of Amaro, and a bouquet of flowers that looked like they'd come straight from the lobby. Two bathrobes were arranged artfully on the bed with a set of towels shaped into swans. Will half-smiled. The hotel clerk had probably mistaken Hannibal's rush to get the room as evidence of a romantic interlude that desperately needed a rendezvous point. It was almost Valentine's Day, after all. And with the money he'd probably thrown down, well—

Hannibal slipped Will out of his arms and into a cushioned chair next to the small table with the drinks, then went to the bathroom to get him a damp washcloth. He moved to dab Will's eyebrow, but Will shrank back, holding out his hand. Hannibal blinked, then gave him the cloth and let him do it himself. Will pressed it to his split brow and snagged the Amaro, tossing it down. Hannibal hesitated a moment, then did the same. Will watched him open the bottle of wine and pour them each a glass before settling gracefully into the other chair. They sat in silence for a long time.

Finally, it seemed, Hannibal couldn't stand it. "What now?" he said softly.

Will drank half of his wine in one swallow. "I have a proposal." He winced. "Okay, poor choice of words. I have a suggestion, then."

Hannibal's face was stony, but his eyes seemed devastated, suddenly wet and glistening. "What do you suggest?" He put the wine glass to his nose and mouth and inhaled, perhaps to distract himself from the moment, perhaps out of habit. He drank, then set the glass back down, fingering the clear stem softly. Will watched his pale fingertips caress the crystal and felt a pinch of longing for that touch, velvet-wrapped marble, cold and sure and strong. He drained his own wine again and let Hannibal refill it.

"I think we should, in the immortal words of the Beatles, just *let it be* ." Will brought the wine to his mouth to stop himself from speaking further. The alcohol dulled the aches of his body and he was desperate to lose himself in it.

"Explain, please."

"I know it'll go against your every instinct as a psychiatrist, but here's what I'm suggesting. *We don't talk about this* . We don't try to process it, or get to the bottom of it, or change anything between us. We just let it be. We try to forget about it and we go back to the way things were."

"Forgiveness is too difficult for one person. It takes two – the betrayer and the betrayed." Hannibal sipped his wine again.

"The, ah… key here is to resist the, um… temptation to try to figure out which of us is which," Will said, running the tip of his tongue over his lower lip

“I forgive you, and you forgive me,” Hannibal mused, not meeting Will’s eyes.

“Something like that.” He drank again. Then, “What do you say?”

“Do you think you can forgive me?” Hannibal asked, his voice soft and sad. “And forget what I said tonight?”

“Yes and no,” Will admitted. “But I can try. And I could ask you the same thing.”

“You would receive the same answer.”

“Right.” Will drained the wine again. “Then we agree. Except I have one more, ah… *caveat* .”

“Which is?”

“I need you to answer my question. Then we put it to bed, and we put ourselves to bed.”

Hannibal still wouldn’t look at him, focused instead on a reproduction of a fresco on the hotel room wall. “What question would that be, Will?”

“You know which one.”

“I thought the idea was to forget that our conversation happened.” His practiced, mild voice had a stiff rigidity that betrayed everything to Will, even without the empathy pulse.

“Conversation is an interesting word for what we did,” Will replied with a sigh. “I just… want to know. Honestly. *Please* .” Silence. “Hannibal, just answer me this one question, and I won’t bring it up again.”

Still nothing.

“I know why you joined up with Daylight,” he began, then winced. It physically hurt to talk about this, a shock that traveled between each of his wounds, large and small, a matrix of agony without the accompanying pleasure. “If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em, right? Better to kill your own kind – and, ah… enjoy a little cannibalism, right? Vampire blood makes you twice as powerful. Again, it makes perfect sense. Nobody who really knows you thinks you’re part of the team out of some kind of fucked up altruism. But what I don’t understand is… why you, ah… why you *pursued* me. Why you still want me.”

Unbelievably, a tear slipped from Hannibal’s eye. Though his face didn’t change, and his voice showed no trace of it, it existed nevertheless. “When I met you, to my delight and horror, I began to awaken,” he said at last, voice even, measured, deadly. “After centuries of violent delights, answering to no one, a slumbering part of me opened its eyes and saw you.” He looked at Will directly now, and Will felt a pit open in his stomach, a tremor up his spine. “And I will not rest until I possess the object of that awakening. I’ll let you see me, Will. Know me. It’s a rare gift, if you want it.”

Will swallowed, nervous sweat gathering on his forehead as his heart kicked up a notch. “And what will you do — if I don’t accept your gift?” he inquired as gently as he could.

“Then I will be content to try until I am nothing but a pile of ashes on a blighted earth,” Hannibal replied.

Will reached for his hand. Hannibal’s face registered gentle surprise as their fingers touched.

“All right, then,” Will whispered, voice trembling. “That’s all I wanted to know.”

“So now,” Hannibal said, tightening his grasp on Will’s hand. “We let it be.”

“We let it be.” He smiled. “Words of wisdom, right?”

“So it seems.” Hannibal let go of him, settled back into the chair, and drank his wine.

There was a soft knock on the door. Hannibal went to answer it, spoke softly and briefly with someone. He returned to the main room with a black traveling bag and a bottle of champagne in a bucket. “Clothing from home,” he explained. “And this was compliments of the front desk, of course. You’ll have to drink it. I find carbonation unpleasant.”

Will half-smiled. “I think I can handle that.”

Hannibal set the bag on the bed and popped the cork on the rounded glass bottle. Retrieving a champagne glass from the antique bar against one moss-green wall, he poured it and handed it to Will, who drank it in one swallow. “Would you like to get out of those clothes?” Hannibal asked conversationally, taking a sip of his own wine.

“Yeah. You might want to get out of yours, too.” Dark colors hid the bloodstains to the unobservant, but there were stiff splashes on the fabric of Will’s flannel where it was clear something had spilled and hardened. Besides that, one of the seams in his shoulder had ripped.

Hannibal nodded, and went into the large slate-tiled bathroom, where he carefully undressed to his undergarment and rolled his clothing into a bundle. Some flakes of red escaped, but there was otherwise no mess. He found the laundry bag provided by the hotel and put the bundle inside. Beneath his clothing, there were smears of Will’s blood on the marble-white chest and collarbone.

Will poured and tossed back another champagne, then shifted in his chair and kicked his shoes off with a grimace.

“Is the pain much?”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Will told him honestly.

“Get undressed. We can assess the damage.”

Will cocked his head a few degrees. “What are you waiting for?”

A smile twitched at the corner of Hannibal’s proud mouth, and some of the light returned to his eyes. He approached with deliberate steps, and held out his hand. Will took it, and accepted the help getting to his feet, his knee sending fiery pulses down his leg in protest.

Hannibal eased off his jacket and hung it over the back of his chair, then folded the ruined flannel away from his body, letting it whisper to the floor. He caressed the side of Will's face with the lightest frozen touch and was rewarded with a tremor. The other hand stole beneath the hem of the black tee-shirt, sliding against Will's abdominals, around his hip, to the bow of his back, the base of his spine. "This is what you want?" he whispered, his voice and his touch the syntax of desire.

Will nodded, and touched Hannibal's hips with the same soft hesitancy. "What about you?"

"You know my answer." Hannibal kissed him tenderly at first, then with more pressure. He pushed up the shirt and Will broke away long enough to lift it over his head. To his surprise, Hannibal unbuttoned and slid his jeans down to his feet so he could step out, kneeling before him in supplication. It was both endearing and unnerving, and Will was glad when he stood, sliding his hand around Will's backside and taking him into his cold white arms again.

"I will be gentle with you," Hannibal promised.

"Like hell you will," Will replied with an easy smile.

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Will's smile rips through my core, bringing a rush of desire and joy and the unmistakable ache of my unrequited love. Damn him. Curse this, all of it. It feels like a betrayal of the higher self I've crafted for so many centuries, the demigod, the hedonistic immortal, lord of the world, prince of civilization. Brought down by a boy, a little half-breed Cajun-Irish creature who just happened to have been born this beautiful and held onto his mirror neurons.

Why do you love me?

Why?

What could I say?

You are the first person I have ever met that has gifted me with the tiniest, diamond-rare shred of hope that one day I would find someone to share eternity with. That has the capacity to see all of me, the beauty and the horror, and somehow love me in return. And to possess you, to win you, to have you, I have betrayed my own kind and the vows I made against God and the universe. But I have done things that if you knew of them would make you hate me for the rest of time. How do you suppose I sustained myself before we met and I learned to enjoy eating my own kind? I killed for sustenance. I killed for pleasure. I killed when I was bored or curious or offended by rude behavior, and to this day I feel no remorse.

Will. I shall love you until it destroys me. I am your slave, and I resent you as a slave resents the master. Longing chains me. Hope poisons me. Inside of me a war is raging between my pride and my very being, who I know myself to be, and the soul that loves you without hesitation, with no regret, happy to be a worm at your feet. You, the potential of you, your existence tears me apart. I want to worship you and punish you simultaneously. I may not survive you. We may not survive each other. We are conjoined, and will certainly not survive a separation.

But those words can never be said. Not now, at the very least. Perhaps not ever.

Will pulls on one of the plush robes and reclines back at the head of the bed, watching me, a curious look on his face, as if he's spoken and I haven't responded. He raises his hand and makes a graceful gesture of beckoning.

What can I do but obey? I come to him, crawling across the bed. Supplication again. My gaze caresses him as surely as my fingers will, devouring the angles of his neck, the sweet curve of his shoulder. The injured leg he favors, drawing it up against himself, the other long and gracefully muscled, the foot alone a classical painting. Sacred, all of it – where his taut thigh eases into the rounded backside, covered just enough by the fold of the robe to feel as if the cloth mocks me.

I reach out with a hand that seems steady enough, though I feel it wants to shake with desire. I trace my fingers gently through Will's curls, noting their fine softness, each strand glossy like the pelt of a well-fed animal. I skim my touch down Will's temple to cup the side of his face. He leans into my hand, expression contented, gentle. Beautiful. My fingers tremor as they curve under his chin, lifting it to bring our lips together, featherlight. *I will never be sated. I will never have enough* .

The kiss intensifies as Will runs his delightfully warm hands over my chest and shoulders, pulling me closer. I will forever seek his warmth in every way – that which comes from his heart. I ease the robe away from his shoulder, then settle my mouth against the hard muscle there, coiled beneath his soft skin. Will denies me for a moment, guiding my face back, cradling it in both of his hands. His next kiss tastes like an apology.

"Let it be," I remind him.

Will nods, running both hands through my hair.

Will relishes my tenderness, I know, but he also embraces the beast, and while I strive for balance, I'm only human.

No. No, I'm not.

Without warning, I snatch him by the ankle of the injured leg and drag him onto his back. Flipping him over, I tear off the robe and dig my fingers into the blossoming bruise on Will's ribs. He sucks in his breath and lets out a pained gasp that melts into a moan as I run my fingers down his tailbone and into his crevice.

"Get on your knees."

Will obeys, but the position isn't to my liking. "Head down." He wields so much power over me and my fate that I am often compelled to take it back, if only for a night. Will knows this. He tilts his face back and smiles coyly. I find myself smiling back, but I shove his head down roughly just the same. "Elbows on the bed. And stay down."

"Or what?" Will tries to press back against my hand, but finds no respite.

I force my other hand against his bruised ribs again, harder this time. Will sings me a strangled growl of agony. “There’s this, of course. Or I could pleasure you until you can’t stand it a second longer, but I won’t let you finish.” These are his favorite torments, and no real deterrent for bad behavior. “I invite you to discover which I may choose. Or,” I suggest, “you can be good.” I bend to kiss the divots just above his backside where his pelvic bone rises against the barrier of sweet skin.

Will chooses obedience – it’s been a long night, after all. I mold his body, elbows on the bed, forearms crossed, head resting on them, knees spread, his cock hanging heavy already in anticipation of me. I visit each of his vertebrae from neck to its shapely end, tasting with each press of lips as I reach beneath to stroke him. He arches his spine: beautiful. Now I slip my tongue down to tease and taste his entrance. His sounds are pained, weakened, but deeply sensual. He’s likely still sore from the first encounter of the night. All the better. Let him squirm.

He’s dripping with want, and I’ve wet him enough to finger him again. Will rears suddenly, lifting his head from his arms and emitting another gasp. I guide his head back down against his arms with firm pressure. “Be still.”

“Don’t stop,” Will begs. As I toy with him, edging him closer, then back again and again, my mind’s eye replays what I saw from the rooftop. How I felt waking to find the bed empty, and only to discover he had left the island without my knowledge. Without my protection. The churn of fear and despair and rage I had not known for centuries. He makes me weak and I want to punish him for it.

He’s begging for it now. Tries to get off the bed, curses at me. I hold him down. Dr. Katz’s treatments have made him strong, but I am still stronger, this body threaded through with the roped muscles forged in the agony of endless nights.

I love him. I hate him for this. I hate myself more.

With this thought, I let him finish. Will’s entire body tenses and quivers in wave after wave of pleasure, and he bites down on his own forearm again to muffle the pleasured half-screams. Then he collapses.

I let him breathe for a minute before turning him on his back and pressing my body over his, inhaling his exquisite scent of sweat and sex, his body and his entire being emitting the sweetness of a rare flower that must be cajoled into blooming. I stroke his damp hair back with one hand, and clasp his other where it lies limply against the bedcover. I kiss him now, even as he tries to catch his breath, making the process difficult, kiss him and kiss him with reverence and violence.

I find Will inching his fingers down my back, then worming his hand between us to feel my cock, swollen and weeping now in its own right. I tongue his throat. “More?”

“Please.” That word from his lips holds more power over me than any other.

“You request so civilly for once,” I say, nipping along the place where his neck meets his shoulder, traveling his clavicle to the scarred place – scarred by my teeth, as it is my favorite

place where his blood is the sweetest – where I dip a momentary fang beneath his skin. Will inhales sharply at the bite. “I suppose I must comply.”

Will emits a pained grunt as I work my cock into his tight warmth. He presses the back of his fingers to his mouth to stifle the cry, but I snatch his hand away.

“These walls are thin,” Will says breathlessly as I slowly circle my hips.

“I don’t care who hears us.”

Will half-smiles, though it contorts a moment later when I thrust deeper. “Do you want the hotel manager knocking on the door in the middle of this?”

“Stifle yourself if you wish, but do not bite that beautiful skin. That’s my prerogative.”

The next time he cries out, Will lets it flower fully from his lips, eyes shut tight, gripping my shoulders so hard I can feel him leaving half-moon fingernail marks in his wake. My movements become more rhythmic, insistent, until my darling orgasms again with a sound of deep passion woven tightly in a tapestry of anguish.

I allow my own climax at the same time. Lifting Will into my arms, I pierce my favorite vein in his neck, taking a whole mouthfuls now where before I only coated my tongue for the taste. The braided sensations of feeding and sexual pleasure bring a rushing sound to my ears. I consciously stop myself from squeezing Will hard enough to crack more ribs and pull out, fangs and cock both.

Now we are in each other’s arms, all tenderness. I master my breathing and kiss Will’s damp forehead, brushing his hair to the side. Will presses close, moving languidly to kiss my temple, then closes his eyes, the loss of consciousness immediate. I move him gently until we are curled up on our sides, face to face. I brush my fingertips over each scrape, bruise, bite mark, watching as some of them evaporate, leaving no trace, and others settle into ugly bruising that dares to mar that perfect flesh.

More. Again, part of me insists

No. Let the boy rest. Have some pity for this beautiful thing you’ve broken.

“Will,” I whisper.

No response.

“Will.” A little louder now.

Satisfied he is asleep, I breathe the words, “I love you.”

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

> Hannibal and Will broke up awhile back over Hannibal's offer to make Will a vampire. In the meantime, Will has begun a secret affair with Daylight Inc's newest Daywalker, Nigel. Then Hannibal comes back to plead his case again, and finds out about his romantic rival. All three of them attempt to work out their problems late one night in the projection room of the old movie theater.

Baltimore, May 2016

Will never locked the loading door behind the old theater. Why would he? Any intruder would be very, very sorry they trespassed, UnDead or human. Though he hadn't had much interest in restoration work since Hannibal had left, it did make it easier when he had to unload supplies or equipment to leave it unlocked. It looked chained up from the outside, and that was enough.

And he wanted to be sure that Nigel knew he was welcome any night he felt he needed to sneak out and see him, even if it made Will kinda feel like a piece of shit for lying to Jack and everyone else. Wouldn't do for the vampire fucker to pick right up with the new Daywalker, would it? But in the wake of his loss, the void of Hannibal, did he care?

So when he heard the door to the projection booth click open, he wasn't concerned, merely turned on his side and sat up to greet Nigel for another sweet, stealthy, but ultimately guilty midnight rendezvous.

But it wasn't Nigel. It was Hannibal, resplendent and vulnerable in the soft light that came through the projection window, wearing tan slacks and matching waistcoat with a white shirt, no tie, sleeves rolled up. Casual, like he had his armor off. Will was dumbfounded, rubbed his eyes — this had to be a dream.

Hannibal must have caught the errant thought that raced across his mind before he could draw down the mental curtain. "But if you're dreaming of me, would you want to wake up?" Hannibal asked softly.

"No," Will admitted as Hannibal stood over him, reaching out with a smooth hand to brush his hair from his forehead, his touch cool heaven. The nighttime sounds of the city sang a particularly sweet rhythm, an unnaturally perfect accompaniment to the moment. "I wouldn't want to wake up."

“ ‘You can go to bed without fear; you will lie down and sleep soundly.’ ” Proverbs were unholy and beautiful coming from those proud lips. Hannibal sat on the edge of the bed at Will’s side, tracing his fingers down Will’s arm, and around his backside. God, how he’d missed that cold touch. “Sleeping naked? Were you hoping I would come?”

“It’s hot out, and, ah… you know how much the AC costs. But… if you want to believe the other thing, then yes.” He smiled dreamily as Hannibal stroked the back of his thigh and calf. “I missed you. Did you find her? Abigail?” He said the name begrudgingly. Part of why they’d broken up – Hannibal’s insistence that they were the vampire girl’s fathers, and she needed both of her parents to embrace the kiss of death.

Hannibal declined to answer. “I was only going to look at you tonight. Just a moment or two. I had to lay eyes on you.”

“Are you back?” Will asked, his voice tight and guileless. “Are you… are we…” Without waiting for an answer, he sat up and gathered Hannibal into his arms, kissing him with needy force. God, he’d missed this – him – his taste, his scent, the cold splendor of his UnDead body…

Hannibal broke off after a few moments and slid his tongue down along Will’s throat to the favored vein. “Wait,” Will pleaded at the last minute. “You can’t leave a mark or he’ll know.”

Hannibal’s maroon eyes flashed their preternatural blood-red, reflecting like a cat’s in the dark. “Jack’s new Daywalker?”

Will nodded.

Hannibal’s face remained still, immobile. But Will saw the muscle in his jaw twitch and knew what it meant.

“Unless you’re coming back. Coming home. Then I don’t care who sees, just like before.”

Hannibal reached out and brushed Will’s sweaty curls across his forehead. “I’m not returning to Daylight Inc. But I’m not above begging you to leave with me, as we’ve discussed.”

“Hannibal, I…” Will trailed off helplessly.

The vampire’s unnatural eyes flashed again, and Will could see whispers of the expression on his face he was trying to hide. It made his heart stumble. “Very well. I’ll leave it where your colleagues won’t see it.” Hannibal pressed Will against the bed – what used to be *their* bed – and whipped off the sheet. He pinned Will down and kissed the scars on his collarbone, eliciting a heady moan from Will’s lips, and then traced his lips lower, lower, leaving a trail of moisture as he skirted Will’s hip. His mouth came down around the taut muscle of Will’s leg and traveled to the inner thigh.

Will was so lost in his sensations that he almost didn’t stop Hannibal in time. “Wait — not there, either.”

Hannibal rose up on his arms and straddled Will, boxing him in. His hand closed around Will's throat, gently, for now at least. "Will." The hand on his neck tightened in increments. "Are you saying that if I mark you there, in that *intimate* place, the Romanian will know?"

Will nodded helplessly.

Hannibal lifted his lips in a momentary snarl, revealing his two sets of fangs. "Consider it a marking of my territory." His eyes flashed crimson and he descended downward despite Will's increasingly loud protestations.

The door to the projection booth burst open and Nigel strode in, half naked in a pair of drawstring pants, his chest and back full of tattoos on display when he flicked on the light. "Will, are you—" His face darkened with fury as Hannibal sat up and turned his direction. " *You* . What the fuck are you doing here?"

"Claiming what's mine," Hannibal said, just as mild and polite as you please, sliding off the bed. "Nigel, isn't it? Dr. Hannibal Lecter."

"You're the one who left," Nigel growled. He was a little taller than Hannibal, broader in the shoulders, but Will knew that a mortal undergoing serum treatments was still no match for a centuries-old vampire. This could get ugly quick. "You should have stayed fucking gone."

"Did Jack choose you for Dr. Katz's treatments because we bear a mild resemblance?" Hannibal's voice wasn't louder than Nigel's, but its deadly monotone of calm was ten times more frightening. They were seconds from coming to blows. "That might explain how you managed to seduce Will."

"I'll rip your fucking fangs out of your fucking skull–!"

" *Stop!* " Will ordered. Then, "Please."

Hannibal and Nigel turned to look at him, each set of eyes, dark brown and blood red, glittering in rage.

"Please." Will got out of bed, wrapping the sheet around himself, as if it would afford some protection. "Let's just — take a second." Will glanced out the projection booth's window at the theater below, making sure whoever was on night watch wasn't going to come racing through the door from the Daylight Inc. facility. It looked like Nigel had shut it behind himself when he'd come through that way. Will turned on a couple of dim lamps, and returned to Nigel and Hannibal, who were still silent, motionless, sizing each other up.

"This doesn't have to be ugly," Will said after a time, sinking back down on the bed. "Hannibal, I'm not gonna say I'm not glad to see you, but unless… you're back… we, ah, we talked about this. I'm not leaving Daylight Inc. I know… you weren't expecting to come here and find out that Nigel and I are sleeping together… which we are." He winced, shaking his head. "This is just… a fucking… mess and… hey, could the two of you can stop *eyeballing* each other like you're going to rip each other's heads off?"

The tension melted down a couple of notches. Hannibal tore his gaze from Nigel's and the Romanian's fists unclenched. "What's to be done?" Hannibal asked after a time.

"Nigel, I'm sorry, I should have asked him to leave. But… I miss him, and I couldn't say no. Just like I couldn't say no to you the first night you snuck up here after hours."

Hannibal's glance over his shoulder at Nigel was pure poison.

"Hannibal… why don't you stay for a little bit. Here with me. We can talk for a while. Then… go wherever it is you went when you left, and don't come back. And nobody needs to tell Jack." He looked at each of their faces as they glared at each other. "Please?"

"Fine," Nigel grunted, shaking his head. He went for the door, but lingered there, hand on the knob.

Hannibal eased himself into Will's lap immediately, arms around his neck, knees on either side, and caught his chin for a sudden kiss that Will couldn't stop.

"Gonna be doing a lot of *talking* ?" Nigel growled.

"Goodbye, Mr. Ibanescu," Hannibal called over his shoulder to Nigel as he guided Will back onto the pillows. "Or stay and watch. It makes no difference to me."

"Hannibal, for God's sake–" Will spat, pushing up against the vampire's chest. "Why are you making this worse?"

Nigel let go of the door handle. He shook a cigarette out of his pajama pants' pocket and lit up. "What a generous fucking invitation," he said acidly, curling smoke through his nose like a dragon. "Get on with it."

"Nigel—" Will tried, but Hannibal silenced him with his mouth. "Han, stop—"

"Why, darling?" Hannibal asked in a conversational tone that was so icy beneath it sent chills up Will's spine. When Will tried to sit up, the vampire pushed him back down on the bed easily, one handed, fingers splayed out on his sternum. Will grabbed his wrist, but Hannibal took hold of the other.

"He just called your bluff. Quit while you're ahead," Will said, his tone clipped, brusque. "Nigel—"

"I'd be very rude to rescind my invitation." Hannibal moved the hand on his chest to take a fistful of Will's hair, and angled himself to use his elbow to pin back Will's forearm. Will squirmed under Hannibal's infinitely stronger frame, and locked his mouth shut as Hannibal tried to kiss him. A nip to the corner of his lips, a stinging needlepoint of vampiric teeth. He opened his mouth to protest and Hannibal shoved his tongue in instead. Now who was being rude?

Will opened his eyes to see Nigel just over Hannibal's shoulder. He had the detached, angry posture still, but there was something unmistakable in his eyes that sent a sudden ice-cold-

white-hot thrill through Will's body. He felt his muscles relax, and fought off the urge to bite Hannibal's tongue in retribution.

"That's it, my love," Hannibal whispered in his ear as he slowly released his painful holds that had certainly left bruises behind. He slipped his hand down along the sheet and caressed Will's cock, which was twitching and filling with a definite interest. "Submit. To me. Perhaps, if you're lucky, to us. Perhaps it's an exercise in vanity, but I've discovered a sexual interest in a partner that resembles me."

Will hesitated. "This is wrong."

"According to whom?" Hannibal tongued just below his earlobe, then sat up on his hips, running his cold hands from his neck to his navel. "Besides, it's too late. I've been saving myself for you. I'm very *thirsty* , beloved, there's no stopping this."

Will looked at Nigel again. The Romanian's face had changed, gone from stony aggravation to a kind of open fascination. He had his hand to his mouth as if deep in thought, running a finger across his bottom lip. He took a drag from his cigarette. "Never fucked a bloodsucker before," he noted.

"Are you two insane–?"

Hannibal curled his hands under Will's arms and hauled him up into a sitting position, hooked one arm around his neck, and leaned back to address Nigel again. "Any requests? The throat is the obvious choice, but perhaps it's the best place to start."

"Hannibal—" Will tried to protest again, but Hannibal caught him by the chin, hand over his mouth.

"Hush now," he warned, squeezing tightly enough to make Will feel like his jaw was grinding against itself. "What's your pleasure, Mr. Ibanescu?"

"You're the fucking expert," Nigel said evenly, raising his cigarette to his lips.

"Thank you." Hannibal curled his hand away from Will's mouth and back into his hair, and locked the other around his back. Will barely got a grip on his arms when Hannibal's teeth penetrated his throat in a rush of sudden, sweet agony. He couldn't stop the moan of pleasure from escaping his lips, throwing his head back. He'd missed this, God—

Hannibal drank deeply, until he must have heard Will's breath take on a cadence of struggle. He left his lips around the wound, massaging it with his tongue until it webbed closed and Will's vision returned to normal. He felt depleted, yet pent-up and unreleased simultaneously. Hannibal kissed him with his bloody mouth, gently, then with more force, supporting him to keep him upright. Will found himself running his fingers through Hannibal's hair, down his back, fingers finding his vertebrae through the thin fabric of his waistcoat and shirt.

Nigel was there, suddenly, standing at the end of the bed. "If you love him," he asked softly, with no trace of malice in his voice, only curiosity, "why the fuck do you hurt him like that? Is it just for the blood? To feed yourself? Do you… *enjoy* inflicting pain like that?"

“I could drink from him with the lightest touch, open his vein so delicately there would be no sensation at all,” Hannibal told him, still in Will’s embrace, his skin warming as in response to the sustenance. “But that isn’t what he wants. Is it, beloved?”

Will shook his head, feeling a blush that burned suspiciously like shame stain over his cheeks.

Hannibal massaged his cock through the sheet again. “You want me to hurt you — but just so. Pain and pleasure, agony and ecstasy. I know just what you want and how you like it, don’t I?”

Will nodded, daring to look at Nigel, who was still staring fixedly down at them. He stuck the cigarette in his mouth and passed his hand over the front of his drawstring pants, cupping his growing bulge.

“I’m not surprised you haven’t discovered this yet. I’ve known Will far more deeply than you ever have. Or ever could.” Hannibal let Will go, and slid off of him, undressing and leaving his clothes neatly on the bench at the foot of the bed. Will and Nigel watched him with intense interest, Nigel stubbing out his cigarette after a time. Will could see the sweat on his brow.

Hannibal lay down next to Will and pulled him close. “Come to me. Show him how you satisfy your other desires. This ought to be very educational.”

“Nigel—” Will began, but Nigel held up a hand to silence him. He settled onto the end of the bed, one leg bent, a new kind of light shining in his eyes, the cherry of his cigarette glowing in the dim light. “This is–”

“Stop talking and fucking show me,” he ordered, voice just above a whisper. His pupils were dilated and the flesh of his lips was pinker than usual. Will studied the sheen of sweat that coated his neck and chest, making his chest hair glimmer in the dim, and he couldn’t help the realization as it came. Nigel was *enjoying* this, much more than he was willing to let on, especially in Hannibal’s presence.

Will half-smiled and nodded, then got out of bed, the sheet sliding away from his body. He opened the bedside drawer to retrieve the necessary product. Hannibal gave a satisfied little laugh when Will anointed himself. “You two have been busy — if you’re keeping lubricants in the nightstand—”

Will silenced his mouth with his own and Hannibal responded immediately, fondling his hardness with reverent touches as Will guided him down and back against the pillows. He folded his long legs around Will’s waist, the heels resting on the curve of his backside, and threw his head back as Will kissed his throat, rutting against him, slipping a finger along Hannibal’s fluttering hole.

Hannibal smiled up at him, maddeningly amused. “What the fuck–” Will barked as a strong arm circled Will’s chest, hauling him up and away from Hannibal’s prone body. Nigel had Will by the wrist now, twisting his arm behind his back, shoving it painfully up between his

shoulder blades. He worked a knee between Will's and used pure force to spread his legs further.

"What are you—" Will panted as Nigel pushed him back down on top of Hannibal, a hand on the back of his head, locked in his hair.

"I'm not going to just sit there and watch you fuck him," Nigel growled. He'd stripped, and Will could feel his cock pressing against the cleft of his ass. Will tried supporting himself on one arm, but it wasn't easy

"Finally, a bit of fire. I do enjoy unpredictability," Hannibal said as he ran his hand down Will's side to grasp his cock from the front with slick fingers. Will gasped, then exhaled sharply as Nigel accepted a squirt of lube from the bottle Hannibal's free hand offered, and slapped it against his hole. Will relaxed as Hannibal pumped his cock and kissed his neck. Nigel released Will's twisted arm – he needed his other hand to spread Will open and finger him into compliance.

"This is – crazy – n' fucked up – *fuck* !" The last curse was drawn out as Nigel pressed into him, gripping his hips now, thrusting hard, causing waves of splitting pain to radiate out and tingle through every inch of Will's body, dovetailing perfectly with Hannibal's pleasurable strokes. It was almost too much sensation, and for a moment, he thought he might lose his grip on reality. It'd happened before, but had been more encephalitis related than threesome related.

"You like this?" Nigel half-whispered, a gravelly sound, as his thrusting increased in speed. He grabbed a handful of Will's curls. "Can't get enough, can you?"

"Be honest," Hannibal warned, lifting his head to deliver a stinging little bite to the skin just beneath Will's jawline before kissing the blood away. He gathered his own cock against Will's now, trapping the undersides together, each of Nigel's thrusts creating the requisite slicked friction. Hannibal moaned, a soft sound backed by the razor fangs revealed when his mouth opened.

"Yes," Will admitted breathlessly, then inhaled deeply, swallowing his cry as Nigel twisted his hair even harder. Hannibal's hand held them together while the other cradled his face.

"Don't let him finish," Nigel ordered, voice strained with passion and exertion. "He comes when I say."

"This is an unexpected turn of events," Hannibal smiled good naturedly even as he released Will's cock, following Nigel's direction immediately. "The Romanian takes the reins. You've got a sadistic streak. Must come with the face."

"Shut your mouth," Nigel warned him. "Or you'll be next."

Hannibal smiled in pure entertainment, that maddeningly little Mona Lisa thing, but complied. Almost. He leaned up to Will's ear. "I suppose I understand now what you see in him." He kissed Will's contorted mouth as he whined again, Nigel repositioning and dragging his cock along his prostate. "I do hope I'm next."

Nigel's grip on his hip was so tight Will had the sense his pelvic bone might shatter. His climax and his anguish battled each other and he couldn't help but beg for… something, he wasn't sure. "Please," he choked out. "Nigel—"

Hannibal must have taken some cue from Nigel, because he drew their lengths together again and resumed the calculated frottage. Will could feel Nigel tense, his grip on his hips excruciating. And then the world went white — then red as Hannibal tore into his throat and drank hard just as they came in tandem. Darkness.

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Nigel lay on his back, drenched in sweat, a hand over his eyes, still trying to calm his breathing. He felt Hannibal sit up and move Will's limp body onto the other side of the bed. Nigel glanced over and saw the *vampire* – it turned his stomach, thinking the word – cradling Will in his arms, tucking him up against the pillows and draping the sheet over him with a final kiss to his temple. He rolled over to Nigel and propped himself up on one arm, the other draped over his bare hip. "I supposed it'd be asking too much to cuddle after."

Nigel scoffed. "Yeah, it fucking would."

They were quiet for a few moments.

"How do you live with yourself?" Nigel asked. "Don't you ever feel guilty for hurting him? About all the people you fucking killed? Hundreds of years of sucking people's fucking blood?"

"Will aside," Hannibal said, "do you ever feel guilty for the people you killed in service of organized crime?'

"I did what I had to do."

"And so did I."

Nigel got up and found his cigarettes, lighting another one and sinking back onto the bed with a groan. "And Will, then?"

"I did suffer what you would call guilt. When we first met," the bloodsucker said, and Nigel narrowed his eyes instinctively as he caught sight of the feral teeth in his mouth. "But I've come to understand him well enough to know better. He wants what I can give him, and I want what he can give me. Symbiotic. Conjoined. I'm not sure either of us would survive the separation."

Nigel blew smoke up at the ceiling. "And where the fuck does that leave me?" he murmured, half to himself.

"You're the link to his past. To his friends here at Daylight Inc., to the humanity I'd have him leave behind. But if I may offer unsolicited advice, Mr. Ibanescu, he doesn't love you. I don't say that to deliberately hurt you, though you and I have very little to like about one another."

“We might,” Nigel replied, tapping ash, “if you weren’t a fucking bloodsucker just trying to save his own skin from Daylight Inc. You don’t give a fuck about the mission. And sleeping with Will and making him love you just fucking makes it easier to believe that you’re one of the good guys here. Will deserves a fucking *future* .” Nigel sat up with a swift, frustrated movement, and perched on the edge of the bed, leaning over to rest his elbows on his knees, cigarette in hand. He took another drag and rubbed his forehead, heart a dead weight in his chest. Because for everything he’d just said, he knew. Will was fond of him, loved him in his own way, but *Hannibal*...

The vampire sat up behind him, and touched his shoulder, a gentle press of cold fingers. Nigel turned to face him, resting the cigarette in the ashtray Will kept on that side of the bed for him. Hannibal looked at him with a kind of mild curiosity, bloody maroon eyes darkly captivating, head gently tilted. Nigel felt a strange melting ice sensation in his head that he couldn’t place. “You’re full of surprises,” Hannibal murmured, his cool hand a heaven against Nigel’s flushed skin. “You have a depth of feeling I didn’t anticipate. The gangster with the tender heart.”

He’s fucking with my head! Nigel’s brain screamed at him. *Don’t look him in the eyes – you can’t resist it, not like Will does!*

“Tell me,” Hannibal commanded.

Too late. Nigel struggled against the seeping twists of cold that found all the crevices of his brain, but couldn’t keep his mouth shut. “I love him. I love Will. He’s my friend. He doesn’t look at me like I’m a fucking damaged fucking monster. When he looks at me I have a clean fucking slate and I *deserve*... ”

“I’m well aware of Will’s ability to look past monstrousness.”

“But you fucking left,” Nigel said bluntly. The feeling in his head was slowly draining until it was gone and what was it that he’d been feeling besides needing another cigarette?

“I did,” Hannibal confirmed, brushing his fingers through his disheveled hair, trying to tame it.

“You wanted to change him,” Nigel said, before sticking a cigarette in his mouth and lighting it. “He told me. Take him away from Daylight Inc. and make him a fucking vampire, the fucking monster we’re designed to fight.”

“And here you are, offering him a chance at a normal life, perhaps, once you’ve retired from active duty. Assuming you both live long enough.” Hannibal’s eyes were glowing red, but in a way that emitted no warmth or fury, only crimson ice, blood on snow.

“Listen,” Nigel said softly, taking a drag. “He doesn’t want a normal fucking life. Trust me. He gets it in his head from time to time, but it’s just fucking… *nostalgia* , not a real memory of a time when he was happy.”

“Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Nigel let go and stood up, stubbing out the cigarette. “I should go.”

“I have to leave in a couple of hours to beat the sunlight. You should stay. So he doesn’t wake up alone.”

Nigel sat back down on the bed. As much as it made his skin crawl to be this close to the preternatural creature, he forced it down. This was the longest conversation he’d ever had with a vampire. And he hated to say it, but it made sense, what Will saw in Hannibal. They did seem conjoined. Just the way that Hannibal spoke – Nigel heard it in Will’s voice. The crawling sensation of being in proximity to a vampire might have been more about jealousy than self-preservation.

But if they were conjoined, Hannibal and Will, came as a package, it wouldn’t do to try and cut them apart. He took a breath and let it out through his nose.“You can say a fucking second, yeah?”

“Yes.” Hannibal shifted over to make room for him. It was a tight squeeze — three men in a queen bed. “It’s easier if you put your arm under — like that.” Hannibal instructed him, tucking himself against Nigel’s side. They lay there in the dark, listening to Will’s quiet breathing. “You’re very warm,” Hannibal said after a time. Then, “How tall are you? I can’t decide if it is your physical stature or your presence.”

Nigel laughed out smoke. “I’m six-two. Only a couple inches taller than you.”

“But broader.” Hannibal’s hand stole out to trace his fingers through Nigel’s chest hair. “Forgive me,” he said suddenly, taking them away.

“It’s all right. We just fucking fucked, didn’t we?”

Hannibal waited a beat. “We did.”

“Didn’t see that coming.”

More silence. But a kind of intensity had entered the moment that it seemed neither wanted to acknowledge, Nigel staring pensively at the ceiling and Hannibal looking over Nigel’s chest at the antique painting of a sturgeon that hung on the wall. Finally, Hannibal said, “Do you want to know what it feels like?”

Nigel didn’t answer right away as he tried to work out what it was Hannibal was talking about. “I’ve been bitten by a fucking vampire before. Comes with the job.”

“In an attempt to kill you. I told you, I can do it many different ways and in different locations to achieve different sensations. I offer because this is a very unique situation that may not repeat itself.”

Nigel hesitated. “What about Will?”

“He won’t wake for several hours.”

“Not what I meant. Will this piss him the fuck off?” But already, his hand had come against Hannibal's back, a light touch, but significant nonetheless. “Are we making a secret?”

“I think he’d be quite pleased. Aroused, even.”

Nigel half-smiled, tossed his cigarette in the ashtray, then passed his hand over his forehead. “I am curious,” he finally admitted. “I’ve seen all the fucking scars you left on Will’s body. Must’ve felt good if he let you do it that much.”

Hannibal sat up slowly, bending at the waist as Nigel lay back on the bed entirely. The only sound was the little huffs of Will’s unconscious breathing. The vampire waited for Nigel’s nod of consent, then slung a leg over his hips, settling down, eyeing his tattoos and his cock, which was making its opinion known.

Nigel tentatively put his hands on Hannibal’s muscular thighs. “How do you kiss him?” Nigel asked suddenly as Hannibal bent down, palms on the bed. “With your fucking animal teeth?”

“Either very carefully, or with no care at all,” Hannibal told him softly. He lowered himself down until his lips came against Nigel’s. They were smooth and cool, with a hint of coppery sweetness. Nigel let one hand roam up to touch Hannibal’s hair, experiencing its incredible softness. The kiss deepened, though Nigel was still hesitant. Hannibal didn’t push, let him set the pace, which increased in pressure and depth until the unavoidable happened — Nigel cut the side of his tongue against Hannibal’s fang.

Nigel pulled back and Hannibal allowed it. He put his finger to his mouth and looked at the dot of redness, then up at Hannibal, whose tongue emerged to taste the remnants. He quivered under Nigel’s hand that still rested on his thigh, closing his red eyes briefly.

“What does it taste like?” Nigel asked him.

“Just as each wine has a signature blend and changes with time…”

“But there’s something about what Bev does to us that makes it even fucking better. Will told me.”

Hannibal paused. Then, “I’d like some more.”

Nigel felt a tightness in his chest and a heat gather between his legs. He formed words of protest, that this wasn’t a good idea, but they never made it to his lungs. Hannibal leaned over him again, kissed him gently, then moved his mouth along his cheek to the edge of his jaw. Nigel’s hand was in his hair again, grasping tighter now, trembling under Hannibal’s mouth in anticipation of the bite.

When it came, Nigel didn’t hold back his sharp sound of pain. There was a strange pulling sensation as the vampire drank, and yes — he could feel it traveling down to his pleasure centers as if connected by a cord or an electric wire. Then Hannibal reached down and palmed his cock, affectionately practiced, and Nigel shuddered out a moan. The pleasure was terrifying, the loss of control unacceptable. But if Hannibal was telling the truth, if he was to believe his own eyes, then that act of letting go, relinquishing control and choice into

someone else's hands — or fangs — was what Will wanted, what he was desperate for. How could Nigel hope to give it to him?

Hannibal pressed his tongue over the wound after a few moments, held his mouth over it until it healed courtesy of Bev's serum. When Hannibal finally sat up, drawing a hand delicately across his lips, Nigel glared at him, his heart undulating between fury and arousal.

"Never do that to me again," he warned, voice low, strained. "Or I'll fucking kill you."

Hannibal opened his mouth to reply, to apologize, perhaps, but Nigel moved, faster than the vampire expected, it seemed. Will was built to resist mesmerism and *know* the monsters they killed. Nigel was built for violence, and the serum only enhanced that. He reversed their positions, pressing Hannibal down beneath him. The UnDead betrayed mild surprise, then smiled as he felt Nigel's cock grind against him. "For the record," he said as Nigel's grip on his arms tightened, he hoped, to the point of discomfort. "I could throw you off of me. Dr. Katz is brilliant, but a Daywalker is nothing compared to the real thing."

"Then fucking do it," Nigel challenged.

"And wake Sleeping Beauty?" Hannibal shook his head, another one of those damned closed-mouth smiles on his face.

"You're lying."

"I suppose you'll never know," Hannibal teased with the coy lift of a pale eyebrow, fondling his cock again. "But whatever are you going to do about *this* ?"

Nigel's response was to bury their mouths together, pinning the vampire's arms above his head. Hannibal declined to struggle, a bemused look on his features that contorted into one of surprised arousal as Nigel pressed his mouth against Hannibal's throat instead and bit down. The act didn't draw blood, but the sound Hannibal made through that fanged mouth was exquisite, joined a few moments later by another moan, the result of the sudden crush of Nigel grabbing him by the thighs and fucking into him unannounced. Hannibal didn't – or couldn't – muffle the sound of surprised agony. "What a pleasure, to see what you're capable of," he panted.

"You like this?" Nigel demanded in a hoarse whisper, perspiring again as he worked his hips.

"No," Hannibal said, which only made Nigel go harder, filling the projection booth bedroom with the licentious slap of skin-on-skin. "But by all means, don't let that stop you."

"Does he fuck you like this?" Nigel demanded, bending forward, his grip on Hannibal's wrists like hot iron bending over frozen metal.

"Sometimes," Hannibal replied, though the word was a half-sigh. "We're very versatile." He smirked as Nigel grunted in exertion, putting a hand around Hannibal's ivory throat and squeezing. "If you want to know, I think you're bigger than he is. Thicker, anyway."

That comment sent Nigel plunging over the edge, his muscles twitching, filling the cold creature with what felt like wave after wave of his seed. When he collapsed on top of Hannibal, the vampire showed him that he hadn't been lying before, throwing them both off the bed and onto the floor with a loud thump that shook the ashtray on the side table. Panting, Nigel tried to get out from under him, but Hannibal had him pinned this time by the wrists on either side of his head.

"Get the fuck off me," Nigel ordered, but Hannibal just tossed his hair out of his eyes with a bemused little tutting sound.

"I thought this might be the beginning of an uneasy truce between the two of us. Perhaps we've laid the foundation. You've shown me what you're capable of, and I'm going to repay you in kind." Hannibal bent over him and opened his mouth, pressing it into the other side of Nigel's throat this time.

"No-" Nigel protested.

Hannibal pierced his flesh and drank, until Nigel's world went black, the end of a film without the *fin.*

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> Mason Verger has captured Will and is using him for bait to lure Hannibal and/or Daylight Inc, an attempt to trap and destroy his enemies. Nigel and Hannibal both show up to save him.

Virginia, December 2016

Mason Verger thought to set a trap for me using Will as the bait. It infuriates him, my existence; a centuries-old vampire commiting the deadliest of undead sins and gleefully killing my own kind. But as I know, and Abigail knows, I am not of Mason Verger's common stock. My bloodline is ancient and pure and provides me with the capacity for reason, a deadly cleverness, and the ability to feel genuine love. Compassion. Empathy. Inconvenient, surely, for a bloodsucking fiend. And that is why Bedelia Du Maurier created me and left me within one night. It was a lesson. Better to crush the wounded bird than try and help it.

My capacity for more intricate thought, my owning of my soul, can be a weakness. But it is also a strength. It gives me the focus and power I need to murder every vampire that lurks in the Verger manor, including a creature older than me by another century, the infamous UnDead sadist Dr. Cordell Doemling.

Mason Verger is not here, of course. His cunning is admirable, to be sure. But I'm sure he was counting on Cordell to end me.

How he gaped and gasped and disbelieved when he saw my sword-point burst out of his chest, felt my fangs in his neck. His blood was exquisite, a rare vintage to be sure. And now, I am saturated in it. It rushes in my ears and fills every vein to the brim, lighting up my nerves and the synapses in my brain, flooding my muscles with added strength.

What did they think would happen, taking my beloved prisoner and threatening to kill him? Reap what you sow.

Will is behind this door. I can smell him, and the sharp tang of his fear. If they've tortured him – maimed him irreversibly before I could save him, I will walk into the dawn. I grasp the knob of the heavy oak door and crush it in my prodigious grip, smashing my shoulder into the latch. It bursts open in a shower of splinters.

They've kept him captive in opulence, at least, which is what my beloved deserves. The room within is dim, decked in red and black and gold, the massive arched windows looking

out over a black, twisted forest. A golden chandelier hangs above, flickering with faux candlelight. And there is Will, my heaven, curled up on a crimson-cushioned chaise lounge, his eyebrow split, a little blood on his white tee-shirt. I know he was traveling for one of Jack's assignments when they took him – plucked him out of bed, from the looks of it, as he is still wearing his signature blue shorts, cheap and boyish and delectable.

Will stirs with a groan. His wrists were fastened together in thick metal restraints, and an industrial chain connected to them ran up to a similarly constructed collar around his throat. I can see needle marks on his neck – that must have been how they kept him subdued.

I am at his side in a blink, helping him rise and then rest back against the velvet cushions. "You came for me." Will's Agean eyes are wide, glittering with grateful tears.

"Of course I came." I kneel next to him as he collapses back and stretches out his legs, apparently exhausted, in some discomfort from his captivity. Another glance at his eyes shows he's still drugged, struggling to stay awake. The candlelight flickers over his profile, wild-haired and devastatingly beautiful. I want to touch him. I want to taste him, eat him, fuck him, love him. It's been so long since our parting. But I refrain. I don't know if his gratitude extends that far.

"We should go…" he murmurs, chest heaving with the exertion of consciousness.

"There's no one left to threaten you." I rest my hand over one of his, half my fingers on supple flesh, the others on brutish metal warmed by his skin. "We have all the time in the world."

"Because… everyone's dead?' He smiles, a cruel slice. I nod. "Good," he growls. "Tell me you got Mason."

"He must have sensed me coming and doubted his soldiers' ability to stop me. I don't think he counted on my arrival; preparations were for Daylight Inc. mounting a rescue attempt."

"Wildcard," Will says tenderly. Then, "Can you let me out of this?" Will lifts his hands to his throat and pulls at the collar, revealing a red place where it has left welts on his flesh.

"Will." I slide onto the lounge and gather him in my arms, the chain clinking fitfully. He doesn't resist, doesn't remind me of the circumstances of our parting, shows no residual anger or resentment. Even leans his forehead on my shoulder with a grateful sigh.

He's missed me. It's remarkably evident. My discovery surges through me like the preternatural blood of my vampire victims, blasting through my body in a tidal rush of passion. I angle my head to the side to brush my lips against Will's throat just above the metal collar and shift it away, kissing the raw spots, running my tongue lightly over them. Will whines a small sound of pleasure, or was that discomfort?

I have to know. I want him to say it, to show me that I'm forgiven, that he loves me. I lean away from him and wait.

And he reaches for me, tries to kiss me. Triumph pounds through the chambers of my heart.

But just the ghost of a kiss, the lightest brush, a feather light tease, before I deny him. Lifting Will's hands by the restraints, I lovingly soothe the raw places on his wrists in a similar fashion. This time, I am more convinced that Will's soft sound is one of desire.

"We should go," Will insists, despite the obvious color on his cheeks and the quickening cadence of his heart and breathing.

"I told you, no one is coming." I press him back on the cushions, encouraging him to recline his head in a moment of repose. Part of me knows this is madness. Forgiveness is too great and difficult for one person. It requires two – the betrayer and the betrayed. What my body demands I do now with feral insistence, allied with my wounded pride, may very well destroy my chance.

But forgiveness is also akin to falling in love. I slide a knee on the other side of Will's thigh, against the back of the lounge.

"No one's coming?" Will wonders I pull the cheap cotton shirt down and away from his neck, revealing the sweet space part of the way down his sternum, the swell of his chest rising on either side. He gasps when I rip the cloth open to show me more of the body I've coveted, ached for.

I tease my fingers lightly over the warm, tender flesh, slashed through with a litany of thin, faint scars. I bend, though slowly, giving him time to stop me. He doesn't move, only breathes. I kiss the sweet place beneath his clavicle, trace it with my tongue, then the pressure of my teeth, though I refrain from breaking the skin. I know Will's body better than a map of our planet, the familiar outline of the continents. It is my world, and I am the master of its topography. And so, when I caress him now, with maddening gentility through the thin fabric of his undergarment, he utters that adorable helpless sigh I adore so much.

"What I mean," I say as my gaze meets his, though my fingers continue their tease, one hand pushing up the hem of his ruined shirt to caress the cut lines beneath, the soft hair that leads from his navel southward, "is that no one is coming to save you."

"What?" His question comes mixed with another of those powerless sighs.

The sound shreds my last thread of caution. He is *mine* .

"No one is coming to save you. From *me* ." I snag the chain that dangles from his restraints in one hand and tug it with enough force to snap Will up into a sitting position, bringing our mouths together. The kiss is rough, both of us hungry and careless of my fangs, and it leaves our tongues bloody. A drop of red slides down the corner of Will's mouth. I lick it clean. I've eaten several other vampires tonight filled with powerful Verger blood, but the ecstacy of draining them is nothing compared to the taste of Will, his signature flavor infused with the serum treatments Dr. Katz gives him, which taints his blood with a fevered sweetness I can't help but crave. It has been so long, too long, since I've tasted it.

I grasp the hem of his undergarment and tug it down before losing my patience and ripping them from his body. The ruined scraps of his shirt fall off one shoulder, baring more sweet flesh, its radiant heat. Will gasps as if scandalized, but hums his pleasure, trying to bring up

his hands to touch my face. I deny him this, twisting the chains that bind the collar to his cuffs. My hunger-thirst sears through me with such force I feel a trickle of fear in the back of my neck. Fear for Will's sake. There is only one thing I want, and I want it with a possessive intensity that sounds warning bells in my head. But it can't be stopped.

No pet names, no sweet words, no consideration for Will's pleasure, or bodily comfort. I tried to give him a rare gift, but he didn't want it.

I stretched the chain up and trap it with my hand against the frame of the lounge behind Will's head, pinning his restrained wrists back. The collar pries his comely jaw up and back, digging into his skin and restricting his air, leaving his throat prone, exposed. Will inhales sharply, moves his mouth as if he's trying to speak.

I have no interest in making out the mouthed words. Instead, I drag my nails from collarbone to ribs, drawing blood. Will shifts beneath me, strains against the cuffs, but his resistance means nothing. When I take my time collecting the blood with my tongue, however, Will's struggles fade like the afterimage of a camera flash, and his restricted breaths slow and deepen. His cock is hardening for me and I stroke him as I lick the exquisite ruby drops from his trembling chest, working him through my grip. I tease him relentlessly like this, tracing my bloody tongue around his nipple, sucking, edging it with my blunter teeth.

"H-Hannibal…!" he pleads, voice hoarse from the collar pressing into his throat.

My mouth climbs back up to my favorite place just to the left of where Will's clavicles meet. I am consumed by the red haze now, and thrust my teeth into the warm flesh, my tongue mapping the pre-existing scar tissue as it blossoms with blood, so hot and rich with sunlight, a garden of savage delights.

This room where Will was being kept is littered with the artifacts of his imprisonment – syringes and vials, coils of rope, an IV stand. And a bed where they must have tossed him when he was unconscious, virginal white sheets just waiting to be stained with life-giving red.

I use the chain to haul Will to his feet before propelling him face down onto the bridal-white bedclothes, splattering them from the still-oozing wounds on his chest. I want to take him from behind, pulling the chain back over his shoulder to trap his cuffed wrists against his chest. "Will," I growl, guttural with longing.

"Yes," he encourages me. I bury my face in his crevice, teasing his opening with my tongue, wetting it thoroughly to the litany of his moans.

"What the fuck?" A voice echoes through the room from the doorway. I still hold Will by the chain and one of his rounded cheeks, turning my head to see Nigel, my insufferable replacement. His eyes glitter dangerously and he exudes cold rage. "Let him go," he orders, approaching with a wary precision. I see the gun in his belt and the long knife strapped to his thigh. He's dressed for action in tactical black, here to save Will, no doubt. "Are you fucking deaf? Let him go. Now."

I release Will and stand. The metal rustles as Will squirms onto his back to see these events unfold. “Nigel,” he says, the name twisted in incredulity. “You came…?”

I interrupt. Rude, but I am at my limit of patience, my cock throbbing in my trousers and my fangs drumming the same rhythm in my skull. “Go. Now. I’ve saved him. He’s mine, and I’ll be taking him with me.”

“Hannibal!” Will warns. “Don’t…!”

“Save him?” Nigel spits with a snarl, baring his imperfect teeth. “He’s still wearing fucking restraints. He's bleeding and fucking naked – who knows what Verger did to him?” He comes closer, which is a terrible miscalculation. He’s close enough that I can smell his blood, his scent, the acrid tang of cigarette smoke mixed with cloves and a warm wind. “Will, get up. You’re coming back with me.” He holds out his hand.

I glide between them. “You gave Will comfort when I could not. I know you saved his life in Egypt last spring. But your time with him is over. Walk away. For Will’s sake, I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Likewise,” Nigel growled. “But he’s coming with me. Step aside or I’ll fucking kill you.”

I smile. Does he sincerely believe he can best me? Has he forgotten that night in the projector room when I showed him my power, earned by centuries of existence, my cunning? I could have killed him then, but chose not to. My mercy was made and can be unmade just as easily.

“I fucking warned you–”

“Nigel, stop!” Will’s order is ignored. Nigel swings at me, but he’s telegraphed his attack so openly it’s almost childish. I counter instantly, catching the Romanian’s wrist and twisting it painfully, raising a hand to strike him.

Warm fingers close over my skin. Gentle. I turn to see Will with his bound hands twined over my raised fist. “Don’t,” he begs. “Please don’t hurt him.”

“Fuck, Will, what the hell are you doing? Let go of him and fucking come fucking *here* ,” Nigel tries again. “I’ve seen what he’s capable of. You belong with your own kind.” He presses a hand over his own heart. Yes, the two of them are just alike, lab-constructed killing machines ready to be deployed at Jack Crawford’s whims.

“He’s nothing like you,” I say, My voice is mild, matter-of-fact, but the crimson clouding my vision demands I tear out his throat.

“Stop.” Will releases me and positions himself firmly between the two of us, the chain rattling faintly. “This isn’t what any of us wants or needs right now. I’ve been stuck here for… who the hell knows how long, drugged up and tied down–”

“Will…!” Nigel attempts to interrupt. How Will suffers through his rudeness is beyond me.

Will silences the Romanian quite effectively by twining his fingers in his black shirt, such as he can wearing the restraints, and kisses him, long, slow, deep.

Ah. Will's personal brand of peacemaking is tempting, to be sure.

I close the distance, coming up behind Will, watching Nigel, who has his eyes closed, savoring the moment, as he well should. Can he taste my blood on Will's breath?

Nigel opens his eyes, strokes Will's hair. He makes eye contact with me. The fury has softened into something else, and he gives me a slight nod. I see he hasn't forgotten that night in the theater, despite how it ended for him.

I ease my fingers around the chain from behind, and pull gently on it until Will is forced to concede his kiss and turn to face me. I draw him closer in one-inch increments.

My other hand finds the side of his stubbled face to guide our mouths together again. I taste Nigel's lips on Will's. Smoky, but not altogether unpleasant. Nigel watches us with a kind of curiosity that makes his interest and fixation clear. He positions himself behind Will to press his lips against Will's raw neck, sliding his hands around to caress his body, working down lower and lower until Will breaks his kiss with me to make an uncontrolled noise of pleasure. Nigel looks to me and raises a pale brow, holding out his hand. He looks like me, and I'm beginning to wonder if we share other commonalities. How we like to have Will, for instance.

"By all means," I murmur politely, and pass him the chain. Nigel twists it tight, guiding Will to him, then forces him down onto the blood-flecked sheets. I slide onto the bed next to Will, kissing him, telling him he's beautiful while Nigel frees himself from his weapons and clothes. He kneels on the bed now – a new tattoo, I see – and takes the chain again, roughly positioning Will how he wants. It really is a joy to watch. Within moments he has Will pinioned perfectly in order to penetrate him. I lay partially beneath Will to stroke him simultaneously and have unfettered access to the veins of his neck and the sweet spot on his collarbone.

There's a bit of moisture, I assume, from my tongue that remains, but Will cries out and digs his fingers into the sheets as the Romanian parts his cheeks and to breach him, grunting like an animal. Nigel seemed to temper his lust just enough to go slowly at first, though I do not hesitate to tear into Will's tender flesh and drink, leaving a trail of teeth marks along his clavicle, on his shoulders, on his neck above the collar. My desire to orgasm is overcome by my ache for his blood and his taste, to watch him like this, an angle I'm rarely privy to.

When Nigel is at last encased within Will's body, hands caressing his back and holding his hips, the Romanian's movements become faster, rougher, treating the prison chamber to the sound of slapping skin. Will is dripping into my hand, and seizes in a sudden crest, spilling on my already crimson-stained shirt, ruined by my massacre. His pounding heart, racing from his orgasm, makes the blood rush faster into my mouth, too fast to swallow, and it spills from my lips and soaks back into my hair and down my neck.

Nigel orgasms with a beast's growl and collapses on the bed next to us, breathing raggedly. Again, we are alone. Will has lost consciousness in the wake of blood loss.

I tuck him gently against the bed and find the key, which I took from a dead Verger vampire, in the pocket of my discarded trousers. Nigel, still breathing heavily, sits up on one elbow, and I hand him the key before sinking back onto the bloody bed. Gently, he lifts Will's limp arms and unlocks the restraints, frowning at the raw, bleeding places, and then frees his neck. "You fucking came here to fucking save him," he growls, stroking Will's hair and the contours of his face, the curve of his Botticelli mouth. He arranges Will on the pillows, minding his comfort, before getting to his feet. "And you fucking drained him instead, hurt him - that's what your fucking relationship's been about the whole fucking time, hasn't it? You don't deserve him. You should leave him here with me. And never come back."

I smile, gentle as Flora's in *Primavera* as I lay back on the bed, examining the blood on my hands, touching the rapidly drying splashes on my face and chest. "A scolding from St. Nigel of Bucharest. Have you forgotten what you've just done? What you let me do to him while you had your pleasure?"

Nigel's tawny eyes are hard, hateful. "You fucking… *seduced* me. Just like you did with Will. That's because he's so fucking innocent. That empathy thing in his head, he can fucking understand you even if you're the fucking devil himself. But I've seen enough shit in my life to know what you really are."

I comb my bloody hair over my forehead before draping my arm over my hip, deliberately sensual. "And what am I?"

"You're a monster, Hannibal Lecter."

I can't help but smile again. He's so righteous – perhaps that's what Will saw in him, aside from his physical resemblance to me. I pass my crimson fingertips over my lips, another deliberate tease. "You're welcome."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Nigel yanks his clothes back on, feeling, perhaps, too exposed.

"I'm a very convenient monster for you. Think about it. If I hadn't left Daylight, you never would have come into his life. Comforting him was your means of ingress. You took advantage of his vulnerability in the wake of our disagreement. So, you're welcome. I know from experience what a blessing he is."

"You fucking *disgust* me."

"Not enough for you to refuse my invitation," I countered. "My monstrosity is my gift to you. Monsters live in the borderlands. We transgress so you don't have to. You've clearly always wanted to take our sweet Will by force."

"No, not like that!" He paces the foot of the bed, a caged tiger, hair awry, the tattoo on his neck pulsing with his racing heart. I can hear it in his chest. "You and your fucking *mind games* !"

"And yet." I motioned to Will's unconscious, bloody form, so beautiful and broken. "I provided the opportunity for you, and now you can hand me back the guilt and shame."

“You’re the devil,” he snarls.

“Exactly,” is my response. My mouth is dry, though I can’t understand why; I’ve just tasted enough of Will’s essence to cause him to lose consciousness. Yet there it is, my thirst, pounding through me like waves against jagged rocks, full of riptide. “ Come here.”

“What?”

“I seduced you once. Might as well try my luck again. Come to me. Don’t make me wait.”

“Aren’t you fucking satisfied?” he sneers, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

“Not yet. Now, come to me.” I stretch out a bloody hand.

“If I get near you again it’ll be to break your fucking neck,” Nigel threatens. But he’s taken a step closer. Then another.

“I would love for you to try.” I do love a fight to the death. Though the more I think about it, it would be a pity to destroy Nigel. Will is so deliciously submissive when the three of us are together. Something about this Romanian makes him so pliable and I do find it more than delicious.

Nigel accepts my challenge, closing the distance in a blink and looming over me, one knee on the bed, hands locked around my throat. I close my hands around his wrists but make no attempt to break the hold, merely smiling up at him. He emits a growl of fury low in his throat and yanks me to my feet by my neck, pressing his thumbs harder and harder into my trachea. I wheeze, cough, my vision dimming around the edges. But I let him try; he seems so intent, and his fury smells fevered and sweet. Slowly, I release one of his wrists and reach out to him. I caress the back of my fingers oh so gently over the Romanian’s cheekbone, then roam them back behind his ear, into his sweat-dampened hair.

His eyes change. The fury evaporates from them, softening their glittering rage. Simultaneously, his fingers relax from my throat, a millimeter at a time, until they merely rest against the bruised flesh. As if drawn in by a magnet, he leans closer, closer still, until he releases a held breath and kisses me. His lips are warm, astonishingly so, larger and rougher than Will’s, though his kiss is surprisingly tender in the wake of his violence. I do love his dichotomy of sweet chaos.

His hands roam away from my neck and travel instead down my back, the other cupping the side of my bloodstained face. I can barely contain my triumph as I let him draw me into his arms, hands against his chest where I can feel the thunderous rhythm of his heart through the cheap fabric of his shirt.

Nigel lowers me onto the bed and breaks our mouths apart, moving his lips down my neck, then back up again. “Damn you, Hannibal,” he breathes against my ear. I make a nearly-inaudible sound of amusement, slipping my arms around his back, finding his mouth again, the kiss more insistent now as I work my hands into his pale hair, giving it the gentlest of tugs. Nigel strokes my face, thumb sticking momentarily to the dried blood that still caked it, noting again, perhaps, our resemblance.

I reach between his legs and feel his outline through his clothing. “What are your intentions? Hold me down, have your way with me?” Nigel kisses me harder, probably to shut me up, invading my mouth with his tongue, courting my dangerous teeth. I ignore the impulse to bite down on it, and evade, turning his head to the side. Nigel settles for working his lips against my throat again. He really is quite good. “What if I said no?” I goad him. “Would you stop?”

“Why would I stop when I know what you want?” Nigel’s words are breathless with lust. He catches me by the chin roughly. “Maybe I’ll put that pretty mouth of yours to work.”

I smile against his grip. “Now who’s the monster?”

Nigel’s hand closes around my throat again, the other pinning my wrist back on the bed, as if he could hold me. I’m letting him think he can. “Want me to show you?”

“By all means. Let’s see how far you can fall.” With that, I reverse our positions faster than he could react, and pin him down easily. How I delight in the sudden surprise that crosses his features. The fury and panic eases off of his face, though, when he realizes what I’m doing, which is undressing him, both of us, and straddling him to ride his cock. Hard and dangerous, a vessel for such righteous fury, now he’s a mewling little mess, and polite enough to work my cock through his fist as I use uncanny strength to tirelessly ride him. He’s infuriating, yes, and is intent on testing the limits of my goodwill, but his cock is thick and perfectly shaped, curved just right to hit my prostate. I have to be careful when I climax so I don’t break his pelvis or ribs.

He growls out a brutally sweet moan when he comes, gripping my thighs, praising me with a litany of curses. It is at this moment I allow myself release, bending down over him to dig my teeth into Nigel’s throat. The blood roars into my mouth, bringing a rushing sound to my ears.

He fights for a long time, and valiantly. Remarkable boy. I can’t bring myself to kill him. I ought to, leaving no witness to tattle to Jack Crawford about what I’ve done and that I have Will, but morale demands I leave him alive. Will would want it that way, and if I’m being honest with myself, so do I. I

I find a shower. Wash, dress. A gentleman again, I gather Will into my arms and disappear into the snowy night, leaving the Romanian asleep on the bloody bed in a house full of dead vampires.

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Nigel leaves Daylight Inc to find Will and Hannibal.

Louisiana, May 2017

Nigel – please stop trying to find us. I'm sorry. I miss you, too, I really do. And Hannibal, well… he didn't kill you, so that has to mean something. But if you keep pushing, I can't guarantee your safety. I'm not planning to go through the change – I don't want to rely on blood to stay alive or be a danger to civilians. Maybe I'll feel differently someday, but for now, you don't have to worry. Also, we don't know what would happen if Hannibal tried to change me. The Daywalker serum altered our DNA. The dark gift might kill me instead. We just don't know. What I do know is that I need to be with Hannibal. It's inevitable. He's inevitable. Please stay away. I don't want you to get hurt. Love, Will.

Nigel lowered his phone. He'd read the email a thousand times, but this time felt different. Now he knew where Will was, knew that he could walk up the gravel drive where his car was parked and find him. His soul roiled, oscillating between fury and murder and fawning love and wanting to beg them to let him stay, join them in this life.

Nigel approached the small country church slowly, still fighting with himself. Jack had told him to leave well enough alone. If Will and Hannibal wanted to flee Daylight Inc., so be it. They had their hunter, and could make another, eyeing potential recruits. There was Duncan, the retired assassin, and Jack, the pretty boy grifter who had charmed his way into everyone's good graces. But Nigel couldn't let it alone. Every day, he woke up and thought about Will. Every vampire he killed had Hannibal's face. But his dreams were full of twisted longing for the three of them to be together again.

"I shouldn't be here," he whispered under his breath. He couldn't hear his own words on account of the cacophony of swamp insects that blared through the darkened countryside. And yet some invisible force drew him forward. He had to find Will. He had to… what exactly? He wasn't supposed to be here. This wasn't advisable, and could easily go tits up. Hannibal had left him alive at Muskrat Farm, but he didn't understand the strange mercy. Jack would be disappointed. Will would be hurt. He was pushing his luck, unraveling it to the thinnest single strand.

Yet he found himself climbing the uneven limestone stairs. The little church was in the middle of the swampy countryside, a couple of miles from the nearest derelict town on its last legs. Despite its abandoned location and the state of its crumbling little graveyard, the

structure had been recently repainted a bright white, the shade of purity, and the wrought-iron railings on either side of the staircase were new.

The double doors, painted red, opened for him, drenching him with the multicolored moonlight as it passed through the stained glass, the illumination aided by dozens of burning candles. The insects were joined by the tortured strains of opera coming loudly from the church's soundsystem.

And here was Hannibal, coming out to greet him, wearing dark slacks and a maroon smoking jacket over a white collared shirt, the picture of civility, his unnatural eyes glowing like coals in his skull.

"Welcome," he greeted warmly, reaching out to shake Nigel's hand. "You're just in time."

"For what?" Nigel demanded, thrown off by the warm greeting. Had Hannibal known he was coming? Had Will somehow sensed him as he investigated the forgotten parish, following the clues to where Hannibal was keeping Will, voluntarily or otherwise?

"This way." Hannibal ushered him into a small foyer. There was a small flight of carpeted steps that likely led into the sanctuary proper, but they paused before ascending. "Now I must insist." He handed Nigel a long piece of silk. "I can't have you spoiling the surprise."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Nigel shoved it back into Hannibal's hands.

"If you want to see him, you will put it on." Hannibal's voice had gone from light and entertaining to cold and matter of fact. "Make your choice, Mr. Ibanescu."

Hannibal was a full vampire, not a simulated daywalker. He had proved over and over again that he was stronger and faster than Nigel, and it was only his whimsy that had left Nigel alive.

And so he complied, letting Hannibal slide the silk not over his eyes, as he'd thought, but between his teeth, looping twice and tying it behind his head tightly. Then he ushered Nigel up the stairs.

The sanctuary glowed with candlelight, the music soaring to the exposed wooden beams, echoing through the rafters. Shining pews lined either side of the aisle, with an intricately carved, gothic-style prayer bench in the center just before the stairs leading up to the altar.

Nigel stopped short as he took in the scene upon the chancel, which seemed to have been turned into some kind of sacreligious sex dungeon. Will knelt on the blood-red carpeting, his arms stretched over his head. Behind him was an enormous wooden cross anchored to the floor with visible bolts. A chain descended from the top of the cross, terminating in shackles that drew his arms up at an angle where he could still bend his elbows. His ankles were likewise shackled to the base of the cross with much shorter chains. He was naked save a blindfold, body heavenly in the flickering, golden candlelight. Despite his position, his face was placid, serene, the hint of a smile.

The gag muffled Nigel's growl. A moment later Hannibal pressed what could only be a knife against the flesh of his neck, his other hand locked around a handful of Nigel's shirt. "Walk," he requested, so politely, just loud enough to be heard over the music, "or I will slit your throat."

Nigel let himself be pushed up to the heavy prayer bench, which was bolted into the floor. There were restraints here, as well, leather with buckles, meant for thighs and wrists to force the victim to kneel in supplication. "On your knees," Hannibal said softly, just over the music. "Strap yourself in."

He apparently didn't move fast enough, because Hannibal pressed the point of the blade into his neck under his chin, just enough to draw blood. Nigel did as he was told, though Hannibal scoffed softly and told him, "Tighter than that." Nigel adjusted the straps, and then placed his last free wrist in the final restraint. Hannibal held the knife with one hand, and used his other to deftly buckle him in, so tight Nigel could already feel himself losing circulation.

Hannibal knelt at his side, folding the knife in and slipping it into his pocket. "There now. Are you comfortable here? Begging for forgiveness from a cold and silent God?"

"Hannibal?" Will called from the chancel, rattling his chains faintly.

"I didn't give you permission to speak, my heaven," Hannibal replied, and Will closed his mouth, waiting patiently, apparently unaware that Nigel was even there.

Hannibal put a freezing cold hand on Nigel's shoulder, then slid it up behind his head, taking a fistful of hair. Nigel grunted as he twisted, the sound again silenced by the cloth in his mouth and the soaring music that flowed from corner to corner. "I'm so pleased you could join us. This is going to be an education. Haven't you always wondered what it is that I can do for Will that you can't? Or won't, even if you know you both would enjoy it?"

Nigel tried again to speak, to call him a fucking monster and threaten to kill him, but it was all lost in the folds of the gag which were quickly becoming soaked with his spit.

"Have you heard of the madonna/whore complex? No, I suppose you wouldn't. It's a phenomenon where one sexual partner views the other as perfect, something to be worshiped, the body revered as if it were moments away from an immaculate conception. This is how you used to make love to Will, isn't it? When the two of you were alone?"

Nigel twisted his head, trying to get free, but only succeeded in bringing more bright pain to his own scalp.

"The gangster with the heart of gold," Hannibal said with a disappointed little shake of his head, his aristocratic lips curling. "And yet, when the three of us are together, you have no problem treating him like a whore, giving him the degradation he always craved but didn't dare ask for. I've taught him now to express his needs. Now he has the full range of pleasure, dominating me when he wishes, or submitting, as he is tonight. The two of us are conjoined. My pleasure is his pleasure, my pain is his pain, and together, neither would survive the separation."

He released Nigel's hair and stood before him. "Watch and learn. It's time you bucked off that better angel on your shoulder."

"You're a fucking sick piece of shit. Let me go. Let Will go, you've just been fucking manipulating him!" All of these vocalizations were halted by the gag, drowned in the music. Hannibal smiled at him over his shoulder, that maddening mild curve, and mounted the chancel with unhurried steps, his bare feet making no sound on the thick carpet. He went over to the intricately carved pump organ and lifted down the riding crop that had been sitting atop it.

"Don't hurt him," Nigel begged, again unable to vocalize his protests. He balled his fists and tested the strength of the restraints. Once, twice, bunching his muscles and pulling with all his might. He heard the heavy wood groan at the force he applied, but it did not break. Sweat rolled down from his hair and trickled along his face, soaking into the swath of red that gagged his mouth.

Hannibal winked at him from his position behind Will. With an easy flick of his arm, he brought the riding crop down along Will's exposed midsection, the whistle of air followed by the solid *thwak* of it against his skin. Will inhaled sharply, tensing the muscles of his arms and throwing his head back. Immediately, a red welt rose on his pale, delicate skin like a blossom opening to the sun. Hannibal strolled across the chancel, running his fingers along the length of the crop, then switched hands and struck Will again, higher this time, across the chest. Will again breathed deeply through the pain, his grimace easing into a half smile and back again as Hannibal snagged a handful of his hair and brought the crop down on the rounded edge of his backside.

"You're doing very well, beloved," Hannibal said, bending down to speak sweetly into Will's ear. Will turned his blindfolded face toward the voice and caught Hannibal's mouth for a long kiss that ended with another blow to the small of his back. Will's sound of pain went into Hannibal's mouth, muffled by the kiss.

"More?" Hannibal asked, his uncanny eyes glowing hungrily, though his voice remained sweetly conversational.

"Yeah," Will panted in response.

Hannibal straightened, and locked eyes with Nigel as he pulled Will's head against his side, cradling it to stroke his hair with his free hand, tapping the crop against the floor. *Haven't I trained him well?* his expression said. Nigel wanted to look away, but found it impossible. Something kept his gaze locked on Will as he panted on his knees, blindfolded and bound, nuzzling up against Hannibal like a dog with its master.

"More," he requested, voice marred with desire.

"Anything you wish, my treasure. It's time, I think, for your religious experience." Hannibal dropped the crop and took Will's bound wrists in his hands. Slowly, still looking at Nigel, he brought his mouth to one of Will's hands and bit it, upper teeth penetrating the palm, lower cutting into the back side. Will couldn't keep control of his agonized vociferation this time — his cry echoed through the rafters, braided with the music. Blood spilled down his arm,

headed for his elbow. Hannibal repeated his wound on the other hand, and Nigel understood what he meant by religious experience. He meant to give Will his version of the stigmata.

Hannibal bent before his sacrificial lamb, running a hand along his battered chest, and sweeping his tongue along the lines of blood that flowed down from the wounds on Will's hands, tracing them from elbow to wrist, sucking on a finger or two. Will murmured an appreciative sigh, a complete contrast to his outbursts moments before. "Enjoying your communion?" he asked Hannibal as the vampire traced his tongue along the inside of one elbow.

Hannibal's face gave a knowing smile before getting to his feet, stepping behind the cross and turning a crank that pulled the chains tighter, releasing the slack that allowed Will to kneel. It bore him up by the arms until he was standing, arms above his head now in the same half-taut pose though a little tighter this time.

"You are as worthy a subject as any of the masters could have ever asked to paint," Hannibal told him, gathering a bit of blood on his fingertip and sketching a crude heart over where Will's was certainly beating furiously in his chest. "You are your most beautiful when you are at my mercy."

"I don't want to be anywhere else, then," Will smirked in good humor, though his expression changed to one of naked desire as Hannibal massaged his cock, giving it a few tantalizing strokes to coax him into further arousal.

"I can see that." Hannibal turned to Nigel with a significant look as he continued to stimulate his lover. Nigel strained against the bonds again and was rewarded with a crack as wood somewhere in the prayer bench splintered.

"What was that?" Will asked breathlessly, sweat sparkling on his brow and running down his chest, the droplets mingling with the blood, glistening red-gold in the candlelight.

"Just the house settling," Hannibal told him. "Now, we have the marks of the whip, the holes for the nails — that just leaves one."

The spear , Nigel thought desperately. "No," he tried to beg.

Hannibal only smiled at him again, then kissed Will's throat, one hand still working his cock, the other stroking down his back. His kisses moved lower, pausing for a brief moment to flick his tongue against the right nipple, then onward until his mouth hovered just under Will's last rib. Will sighed, throwing his head back in pleasure before emitting a sharp noise of anguish as Hannibal bit down on his side with swift, sudden force. When his mouth came away, it was smeared with blood, as was the front of his white shirt. Will writhed against his bonds as Hannibal stroked him to climax, body shaking in a way that Nigel was intimately familiar with. It was unnerving to see it from so far away.

Hannibal wiped his hand and his mouth on a handkerchief, then picked up the crop again and sauntered down the steps toward Nigel, smelling of Will and the rich, sharp copper of blood. He caressed the tip of the riding crop along Nigel's cheek, then from the hollow of his throat to directly under his chin. "You're horrified," he said softly. "I can see it in your eyes. And

yet, your body betrays you." Hannibal edged behind him, and reached around his waist to feel him where he knelt. Nigel was suddenly aware of the painful desire that had his cock straining against his clothing.

"You're thinking, 'I would never hurt him like that. I love him. How could you do that to someone you love?'" Hannibal's words hissed over the back of Nigel's ear as the vampire massaged him through his pants, teasing the outline of his cock with more and more intent. Nigel shuddered when Hannibal undid the button on his jeans and reached inside with his cold fingers. "How could I not? Never mind that I enjoy it. It's that *Will needs it* . He craves intimacy, trust, and a complete lack of control. Our darling is paralyzed by choices, fears making the wrong one, desperate to let go entirely, to be unmade. He wants to be possessed by someone he knows loves him, someone he can trust. He craves it. And who am I to refuse?"

Nigel moaned into the gag as Hannibal's deft fingers continued their work, then exhaled in both disappointment and relief as he took his hand away. "And this is why," Hannibal explained, "he is mine forever, not yours. You are his duty, his obligation, his link to his days of righteous violence. I am his passion. His choice he risked everything for."

Hannibal picked up the crop again and returned to the chancel, where Will was still recovering from his climax. He gave him another stinging blow to the backside, then hit the lever to release the chains to their full length. Will's legs gave out and he fell to the floor, bleeding onto the lush carpeting, though the wounds were closing as his daywalker body worked to heal itself. He rolled onto his back, resting one bloody hand against his bruised chest, and then moved as if to take off the blindfold.

"Not yet." Hannibal pressed the crop into Will's hand, and he obediently lowered it, content to lay there and breathe, the chains coiled around him as if he slept on a bed of snakes.

Hannibal returned to Nigel, the crop tucked under his arm, and unstrapped him from the prayer bench in a businesslike manner. Nigel tried to get to his feet and stumbled, leaning on a pew for support. He frantically tore the gag from his mouth and let it fall on the floor.

Hannibal stepped up to stand uncomfortably close with him. "Remarkable boy. Time to shake off that better angel," he said softly. "You're free. What are you going to do? Run? Attack me? Free him? I *am* curious." Hannibal stepped back out of his way, tapping the crop against his hand. "Or do what it is in your nature to do?" He smiled, a cruel expression. "I know what your body wants. You should listen to it. Better to be a prince in hell than a slave in heaven."

"You're a monster. You're the fucking devil himself," Nigel rasped brokenly, stepping back, rubbing his wrists, trying to get the feeling back in his hands.

Hannibal bowed gracefully in an old style Nigel had seen only in movies. "At your service."

Nigel hesitated, a feather of confused desire tickling along his most sensitive areas. He edged around the vampire towards the chancel, climbing the steps and kneeling at Will's side. Fumbling, consumed with desire but determined to accomplish his task, he struggled with the restraints, trying to free them. "Hannibal?" Will asked, furrowing his brow over the blindfold.

“What are you—” He reached out with his other hand and felt Nigel’s arm, then his face. Nigel caught his wrist as he went to lift the blindfold from his eyes, an instinctive reaction.

“Nigel, what the fuck are you doing here?” Apparently, Will didn’t need his sight to know who it was. Perhaps he was given away by the warmth of his roughened hands, so different, perhaps from the cool, smooth touch of the vampire. “Hannibal—!”

“Be still, beloved,” Hannibal soothed, climbing the stairs to the chancel with easy, languid steps, still playing with the crop. “I have allowed him to come to your aid. I think he’s trying to rescue you.”

“Nigel, you’re not supposed to be here. I left Daylight–!”

“Shut up.” Nigel let go of his wrist and went back to fumbling with one of the restraints, his fury and his desire mingling as he felt the heat of Will’s nearness, the tantalizing ideas of what he could do, what sins he could commit, dancing across the surface of his mind. “I’m getting you out of here.”

“Are you sure you won’t stay?” Hannibal asked, almost pouting, arms crossed. “You’re more than welcome.”

“I won’t hurt him,” Nigel insisted, turning on Hannibal and getting in his face. “And if you loved him, you wouldn’t either.”

Hannibal laughed softly, and touched Nigel again between the legs, daring to kiss the corner of his mouth. Which, for some unknowable reason, Nigel allowed. “If you can wrestle the angel, if you are as powerful as Jacob, you will emerge as someone new. Perhaps someone you’ve always been, but been too afraid to be,” Hannibal whispered in his ear, then backed away, holding his empty hand out as an invitation.

There was a rattle of chains as Will sat up, pulling the blindfold from his eyes. “What the hell is going on here?” he demanded. “Nigel, you need to go. I know how it looks, but this is completely consensual.”

Nigel turned back to him slowly. “This might not be,” he said, his whisper thick with desire. Against everything in his soul, he found himself kneeling next to Will again, and suddenly taking hold of him, flipping him on his stomach, twisting one arm up his back, and looping the chain attached to it around Will’s throat. Will gasped, then wheezed as his airway was constricted.

Hannibal was at his side now, arms around his midsection, unzipping him, dragging his pants down for him. “Allow me to assist,” he purred into Nigel’s ear, giving him a few strokes as he positioned Will roughly, shoving his knees apart. With no warning or foreplay, he spit into his hand and smeared it over Will’s crevice, then pressed his cock against the tight hole. Will pitched under him, emitting a rusty cry from his half-closed throat, and then a deep, satisfied exhale that matched Nigel’s as Will’s body submitted to the rough treatment.

Smiling gently, Hannibal backed away, content to watch from a seat on the chancel stairs where he played with the crop, running his fingers over it suggestively.

Nigel reached around and found that his violent treatment was inspirational. Will was already responding, despite his recent climax, and his pained vocalizations were melting into the deepest sounds of satisfied pleasure Nigel had ever heard him make. Never, in any time they'd made love, just the two of them, had Will sounded like that, tossed his head back with such abandon, the tendons standing out in his neck and arms, matching Nigel's rhythm with such unbridled ecstasy.

"Tell me you like it," Nigel growled, "what I'm doing to you."

Will only said one word. "Harder."

Nigel obliged, stimulating him from the front and pounding him from behind, choking him intermittently with the chain. When Will came, it was so powerful that he couldn't seem to make a sound, a sudden gasping silence, a void of such perfect pleasure that Nigel couldn't help his own climax from riding in its wake.

They lay on the rug for several long moments before Nigel dragged Will's limp body into his arms, holding him tightly, possessively.

Will panted into his neck, a weak hand caressing his chest through the fabric of his shirt. "More," he breathed. "Again…"

Hannibal appeared over them, smiling that same infuriating, benevolent smile. He knelt at Nigel's side and ran the back of his fingers down his burning cheek, hooded eyes soft. "You did very well," he complimented. "I'm proud of you. Take a moment, collect yourself. Then, you must give Will what he wants."

Nigel felt the ghost of a smile possess his lips, lifting one side of his mouth in a reckless curve.

Hannibal kissed him, then said, "God is beyond measure in his wanton malice and matchless in his irony. And in his house, we are the new Holy Trinity."

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

> "Will." His name was even more gentle than the way Hannibal looked at him now as he moved Will's hand free from the scar on his abdomen, the gesture laden with meaning.
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> "You need to go," Will blurted, pulling his hand away, but leaving the scar open to attack. When Hannibal had gutted him, Will hadn't fought back. He understood perfectly why it'd happened. The rejection of Hannibal's gift. On some level, Will had felt like he deserved it.
>
> Abigail, on the other hand…
>
> "You need…" he tried again.
>
> "You said you didn't want me to go," Hannibal reminded him, "because you don't." A pause. "Haven't I always known what you wanted, even more than you knew yourself?"

Casino Monte-Carlo, December, 2021

The last time I visited Monte Carlo, it was warm.

The air itself. Every corner of the city clinging to the sun even after all the light had bled from the sky. Warm ocean that Will promised was brilliant sapphire in the daytime. At night, the sea was black, the surface stained with the lights of the city and its busy harbor.

Warm in the berth of Will's boat as we lay together, sharing his body heat, more than enough for two in summer weather. Warm in my heart, despite Nigel's choice to leave us.

My work tonight brings me to the famed casino, not far from the winding streets featured in the Grand Prix. The last time I was here, it was warm, the streets and waters alive. Abigail, too.

Now, I am here alone, and tonight, the breeze from the sea is uncharacteristically cold, even for winter.

The sour-faced security guard removes the velvet rope and permits me to enter the opulent gambling hall. The sound of voices, clinking glasses, and the shuffle of casino chips envelop me, as do the mingled scents of humans and vampires alike. Here, millionaires living and UnDead play their games of chance far from the wide-eyed tourists and casual gamblers downstairs who often have to be reminded of the dress code.

I do not need to be reminded. I feel most at home in luxury, and tonight is no different. It's always a treat to have an excuse to wear a tuxedo.

I trade money for chips and sit for a few rounds of roulette. When I've doubled my money, I tip the croupier generously, and send drinks to the table for those who haven't been as lucky. A fashion editor from Paris chats with me for close to an hour before her friends reluctantly inform us that their limo awaits waiting downstairs. I decline her invitation to the next party.

"I'm meeting someone later," I say and she kisses my cheeks goodbye. If she can feel how cold my skin is, she doesn't say.

Just as the designer and her friends leave, my mark arrives. I've seen pictures of the man known as Le Chiffre before, of course, but they hadn't done him justice. In photographs he seems severe but sullen, as if pouting for a slight he can't let go of. In real life, he is softer, more animated, bringing a much-needed humanity to the angular silhouette of his bone structure. Once in a while, he smiles. He comes with an entourage of bodyguards and a blonde woman whose true beauty has been lost to weaponization. While most of the gamblers and their friends spend money merrily and fill the hall with good cheer, this group is relaxed but subdued, as if they are unaware that it's Christmastime. Not that they're here for leisure in any case.

I watch Le Chiffre play baccarat as I play games of my own at nearby tables. He wins and loses in a practiced way, taking the house for thousands while still maintaining a believable amount of loss to conceal his mathematical genius. As he shifts to blackjack, the timing is perfect for me to introduce myself. I catch a waitress, liberate two crystal flutes of champagne from her tray, and take a moment before unleashing my plan.

Then, I catch *his* scent.

A man in a gray suit and vest crosses paths deliberately with Le Chiffre, dropping a chip nearly on the terrorist banker's shoe. Bending to scoop it up, he stands to apologize and my entire body pulsates with a burning shock of recognition, my vision blinded white and then feathered black at the edges. I turn and retreat to a corner cafe table. If I still had a heartbeat, it would be thudding in my chest – as it is, I can still hear a mad rushing sound in my ears.

It's Will.

I know him like my own reflection, which, despite the superstitions, I can see and often do. How many hours have I spent studying the delicious curve of his jaw, the angles of his nose, the soft, insolent mouth, its Cupid's bow? Who could forget that face, the glimmering chestnut hair, curls carefully styled tonight but careless in their natural state, the eyes — well, the eyes are a lie. Blue contacts, to hide their fierce golden color, the mark of a Daywalker.

Will is still a master of his uniquely splendid brain. The ability to mentally cloak his presence from other immortals is something that only the very ancient should be able to do. And how perfectly now he uses his empathy to show Le Chiffre and his companion – so unfortunate, that yellow dress – exactly what they want to see.

I haven't seen Will since the night he refused again my rare gift. The night Abigail died.

I wanted to hurt him, and I did. I gutted him, so he might understand what his continued rejection of immortality as my companion felt like for me. I slit Abigail's throat in front of him, and when they both lost consciousness, I cut off her head. All this, my brutal actions, even though I loved her.

But the pain Will caused me eclipsed that love. I did what had to be done in that moment. But ever since, I've realized yet again that Will and I are conjoined. I cannot face the yawning maw of cold centuries without him. And so he must see me as atoning as best I can, working from afar with Daylight Inc, leaving a trail of dead vampires in my wake, drinking only the donated blood and supplements Jack's organization provides me.

Will. Beloved.

He is exquisite. He was in human life, surely, but as a Daywalker it is practically unfair how beautiful he is. If this Le Chiffre likes men, he doesn't stand a chance, and if Will can't work that angle, he'll find a way with the woman in the obnoxious yellow dress.

My prediction is correct. Will has joined Le Chiffre at the poker table. I watch with a kind of pride as Will ingratiates himself, makes the man with the ruined eye smile. His empathy shows him the choreography, and Will dances a delicate dance of flirtation, openness, and almost businesslike relaxation. So intent is he, in fact, that I am now sure that Will has no idea I am here. I chance moving closer, lingering at the bar, close enough that my senses pick up the conversation.

"You're quite the lucky charm, Mr. Devereaux," Le Chiffre says as Will hands him a fresh drink. The blonde arches an eyebrow, but doesn't seem put out that her companion is eyeing Will whenever he can. I gaze into the mirror above the bar, which is positioned just right for me to see the exchange.

"I feel like the lucky one, running into you like this," Will replies, putting his chips down. "We have mutual friends, actually." If by mutual friends Will means that he knows Le Chiffre bankrolls vampires, selling off their ancient heirlooms or loaning them money to buy human blood slaves or fake identification documents, then yes, they have mutual friends. One being Mason Verger.

"Do we?" Le Chiffre adds another stack of chips to his already large bet and lifts his ridiculous gilded inhaler to his mouth for a puff of what is probably amphetamine sulfate.

"I do some business with Nobyuki Nozaki from time to time." Ah. Will was pretending to be an arms dealer, a potential ally in Le Chiffre's international web of money and violence and the UnDead. Name-dropping the Yakuza takes some fortitude, and I'm not sure if Will's thought it through.

Will's gambit pays off as Le Chiffre gives him a closed-lipped smile, clearly impressed. "Then you must know I've been working through a mutually beneficial business deal with him."

"Of course. Though he's a little, ah… *stubborn* , isn't he?"

“Was this really a chance meeting, then?” Le Chiffre signals to one of his bodyguards to bring more chips.

“Scout’s honor,” Will says.

This makes both the blonde and Le Chiffre smile again, remark on his American accent, talk of idioms. “Y’all are two peas in a pod,” Will says.

“What does that mean?” the blonde wants to know.

“You’ll have to guess,” he laughs, putting down another stack of chips.

I can’t imagine Le Chiffre can play and win all night and not expect trouble. Indeed, just when I see security personnel whispering into their sleeves, one of the bodyguards receives a phone call. He leans over and whispers into the blonde woman’s ear. She nods and says, “We have a dinner reservation.”

Le Chiffre stands with another of his smiles, the self-satisfied, closed-lipped expression he seems to favor. Will rises as well and straightens his suit coat. “How long will you be staying in Monte, Mr. Devereaux?”

“As long as you are,” he says lightly. The blonde laughs. She must think he’s flirting with her, or both of them.

“You’ll have to come for drinks tomorrow on the boat. It’s the *Andiamo* ,” Le Chiffre offers.

“That’s the biggest yacht in the harbor.” Will notes, as if he doesn’t already know. “Should I be intimidated?” He holds up the blonde’s coat for her to slide her arms in, and this one action thoroughly ingratiates him – the terrorist banker has no interest in the woman beyond her use, it seems, and she glows when Will shows her this simple yet intimate courtesy.

“Of course not. I’ll help you get your sea legs.” Le Chiffre gives Will a lingering look with his good eye. “Stop by tomorrow night, won’t you? We’re having a little party.”

“I’ll be there.”

The blonde rests her jeweled hands on Will’s arms and leans in so he can kiss her cheeks to say goodnight. Will watches them leave with their entourage, and then turns toward the bar.

He locks eyes with me in the back mirror.

He freezes. All the color drains away from his face. I search it for micro expressions, just as the poker players around us scour for tells. I expect to see rage, pain, sorrow, or, if I am very lucky, a sense of eased agony.

Nothing. Will’s face tells me nothing about him, and everything about myself. That he is still the most beautiful creature I’ve ever laid eyes on. That I love him desperately. That if I don’t touch him before dawn I may as well walk out into it and burn up in the first rays of sunlight. I can’t survive another separation.

After a long moment, he blinks, and makes his way to the bar a few chairs away from where I sit, not looking at me. He orders the most expensive whiskey available, a double, and asks the bartender to charge it to his room.

“Room number, monsieur?”

“513,” Will says. He picks up his glass and walks away.

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Will let himself into the suite and uttered a curse. *Well, this is what happens when you haven't spoken to someone for three years, but share the same mission,* he thought. He knew that Hannibal was still serving Daylight Inc’s purposes, but as more of a free agent in deep cover, working from within the vampire community. But somehow they were both here, presumably working the same case, despite the fact that Jack had made it clear they were never to see one another again on pain of Hannibal’s death.

Will leaned his back against the door and took a breath before turning out a few of the lights, taking out his contacts, and opening the door to the terrace. The lights of Monte Carlo sparkled below him, caught in the gentle glimmer of the black Mediterranean. Night waters. Here and there, Christmas lights flashed in windows or glimmered on the railings of the yachts in the harbor. It’d be charming, he thought, with a mean twist to his smile, if it wasn’t so full of rich assholes.

Charming, if he wasn’t assaulted with memories of Abigail at every turn.

In the center of the terrace was a propane-fueled heater made to look like a square fire pit. Will turned it on and arranged a chair on either side without knowing why. This should be a short conversation.

There was a knock at the door. Will cursed again softly, ran his hand through his hair, and went to answer it. Hannibal Lecter stood in the hallway, dressed impeccably, as always, his ash-brown hair glowing faintly in the demure lighting. Will felt his hand squeeze the doorknob so hard that it bent a few degrees in his grip. He took a breath and sent up a silent prayer that his voice did not waver. “Come in.”

Hannibal obliged, and shut the door behind himself. They regarded one another in the small hallway of the suite that opened out into the living area, the terrace beyond, the bedroom tucked behind pocket doors. Will felt stupid, like didn’t know what to do with his hands. A thrill went from his ribs to his spine, and he could swear he felt the hairs on his arms standing up. The calculating part of his brain told him not to turn his back on his visitor, while the rest of him wanted nothing more than for Hannibal to step forward. Closer to him.

“You’re here for Le Chiffre,” he blurted. Say something, anything.

Hannibal nodded. “As I assume you are. His ledgers, in any case.”

Will’s throat was tight, but he still managed a cavalier, “Obviously.”

“This is what happens when we don’t speak to one another for three years.”

“Back down,” Will ordered, a flare of anger unfurling in his gut like a red flag. “I’ll take care of all of this. This is more my fight than yours, and you know it.”

Hannibal paused. Will stood firm, though the scent of him was enough to wake so many dead memories — that mix of cologne with the underlying traces of something like cedar wood and a gentle floral musk. And blood, of course. Blood somewhere, on his breath, maybe, or clinging to the corner of his mouth. Though from what Will had heard, Hannibal was living the spartan existence demanded by Daylight – no human victims, even if they weren’t killed, donated blood and supplements only.

“Aren’t you going to invite me in?” Despite his debt, despite all that had passed between them, Will figured Hannibal couldn’t help that lilt of hope.

Will finally turned his back and let Hannibal step into the suite proper. “What is it with you vampires and being invited in?” He said it on purpose, to twist the knife.

Hannibal’s smile dipped for a second. Good. The vulgar reminder had had its intended effect. “I only thought we could discuss the situation before we proceed.”

Will shook his head no. “All right,” he sighed, in spite of the action. He almost clapped a hand over his mouth, he was so surprised and betrayed by what came out of it. Hannibal brushed past him and went out on the terrace, removing his tuxedo jacket and draping it over the back of the chair. Will slipped off his suit coat as well, and hung it up on the closet. Grabbing his whiskey, he joined Hannibal on the terrace, settling down into the pool of warmth thrown by the fire. He lit a cigarette. “So, what’s new, Dr. Lecter?”

Hannibal was silent for a long time, staring out over the glimmering city. Somewhere on the curving streets below, an expensive car gunned its engine and squealed around a corner. “Please,” he said, his voice a rumble of vulnerability, “Call me Hannibal.”

It was Will’s turn to hold the silence. Waves of regret and rage undulated through his chest. “Why?” he asked flatly.

“You know why.”

“Why should I?” Will’s free hand gripped the arm of his chair with unnatural force. It cracked in his grip, and he felt the tiny satisfaction of his anger turning to destruction. But where was the regret coming from, leaking into him from a weak place in his defenses?

“Please,” Hannibal said, his voice just audible over the cold ocean breeze.

Will put the cigarette in his mouth and took a long drag. He exhaled smoke, and finally met Hannibal’s gaze. “All right,” he said.

Something in Hannibal’s face relaxed as the wind played with his hair. “Thank you.”

Will drank his whiskey and smoked. Hannibal waited patiently, hands resting on the arms of the chair, glowing alabaster in the cold moonlight.

“Well,” Will said, “I suppose we should talk shop.”

“Ah, so soon?” Hannibal smiled ruefully, holding up one hand to feel the warmth radiating from the gas fire between them. “Why interrupt a pleasant evening?”

“I can’t stand to be cold right now.” Will put his hand out as well to warm it. Their fingers were inches apart. It only intensified the searing heat that snaked its way over his skin. He put his hand back on the arm of the chair. “I just got back from Siberia.”

“That explains the change to your accent. Subtle, but it’s there.”

Will nodded, and chuckled softly. “Yeah. I spoke nothing but Russian for six months. Now I can’t stop. The empathy makes it easy to learn languages, but hard to, ah… let go of ‘em.” He pointed the two fingers that held his cigarette at the side of his head. “Something’s broken in my brain. But, I ‘spose we already knew that.”

“Will.” Hannibal looked at him in earnest now, his eyes as darkly reflective as the nighttime ocean. “I wish I hadn’t.”

Will waited for him to have the courage to say what it was he was actually sorry for, but Hannibal didn’t elaborate. “So you’ve said,” Will replied just as softly, though he could feel the sharp slice of his words. “Doesn’t change what you did.”

Hannibal took a breath and folded his hands against the chair’s arms again. “Siberia. You must have decided to kill the White King.”

“You’re fucking right I did.” Will went back into the room for a moment, and returned to the terrace with a bottle of Japanese whiskey. He cracked it open and poured himself another glass, grateful for the change of subject.

“A vampire with an entire village of loyal subjects ready to lay down their lives to defend his tomb,” Hannibal mused, stroking the cuff of his tuxedo shirt absently. “That must have been quite an adventure.”

“Long story.” Will drained the glass and refilled it. “Too long for tonight. Can we settle the Le Chiffre issue?” As Hannibal opened his mouth to respond, Will held up a finger. “And before you spend hours arguing with me, understand that I know you’re only putting up a fight because you want to be in the same room as me for as long as possible.”

Hannibal’s expression shifted, and he looked away again, towards the ocean. “You know me very, very well, beloved,” he all but whispered, and then went preternaturally still, immobile as rock. After a few long moments, he stood up, and offered his hand. Will reached out and shook it. It was like shaking a statue’s hand encased in a velvet glove. “Goodnight, then,” Hannibal said, and went inside. Will stood and followed, and watched him head for the door.

Again, his voice betrayed him. “Wait.”

Hannibal turned around. His face was mildly expressionless, but his maroon eyes were openly hopeful.

“Sit down.” Will closed the door to the terrace and motioned to the tan sofa. “I’ll tell you about the fucking White King, okay?”

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“You’re not serious.” Hannibal gave him a long look, his eyes pools of glistening velvet in the semi-darkened room. Then, he smiled, and leaned back on the cushions again. “You’re embellishing your war tales, I fear.”

“Hand to God,” Will laughed, pouring another whiskey. “Hand to fucking God, the guy called himself Dracula. He slept in a dirt box during the day, and he’d even made himself some brides. Not as, uhm… *hot* as in the movies, though. He didn’t have much to choose from. It’s really hard to, ah, to be sexy in *Siberia* when you have to wear that many sweaters. He even sent them after me one night, like they were going to seduce and trap me like in the movie.” Will chuckled and took a sip, rolling the liquor’s heat over his tongue before swallowing. “It was actually kind of sad. I mean, these girls had never been to school, never —” He shook his head, chasing the memory away of their faces before he’d cut out their hearts. “Anyway, he’s dead as fuck now, so. *C’est bon* .” If he was ever going to chuck this Russian accent, he needed to reclaim his Cajun.

Hannibal looked at his hands where they held a whiskey glass of his own, their unnatural, glass-like nails catching the lamplight, and then up at Will’s face again. His gaze felt so intensely possessive it made Will stand up and walk over to the terrace doors, just to look at something else. His breath was quick in his lungs, and he closed his eyes against the Monte Carlo skyline to focus on breathing. The suit vest felt suddenly constricting, corset-like. He gulped down his drink and put the glass on the side table by the couch, then worked his fingers against the buttons. His hands shook.

“It’s a beautiful suit,” Hannibal said, still watching him with shimmering possession. “But it doesn’t suit *you* .”

“What?” Will managed to get the last button open and let the vest hang on either side of his chest as he loosened the tie. “It cost enough. What’s wrong with it?”

“It suggests undercover work. You don’t know how to look wealthy. It doesn’t come naturally to you.”

Will laughed, a short, miffed sound. “I didn’t hear anyone else complaining tonight.”

“Everyone else was too busy looking at your face. I’ve told you a thousand times how beautiful you are.” Hannibal gave him a half-sad smile. “But you move in the suit, not *with* it.”

“Makes sense,” Will admitted. He’d gone from white trash to mercenary. Assassin of blood-drinkers… and people, when he had to. Before he was a killer, he was a kid from the bayou, son of a diesel mechanic. Luxury came easily to Hannibal, of course, but not to Will. It never had. He turned back to the window, sick with the sudden realization that aside from knowing Hannibal had held a noble title in his human lifetime, he’d never learned the details. What country? Where had he grown up? What was his human family like?

“What’s wrong?”

Will rubbed his forehead, and turned back toward the couch, though he stared at a spot on the floor instead of Hannibal’s face in the soft light. “I just realized I have no idea where you come from. I’ve heard all the rumors, but I never *asked* you. I know we weren’t together long, especially in the, um, the grand scheme… but I talked about myself, didn’t I. And yet I never *asked* . I never asked you anything.”

“You weren’t interested in my past. It doesn’t interest me, either.” Hannibal rose from the couch and joined him near the terrace window. They looked at the ocean for a few moments.

“Why not? The past made us what we are in *this* moment.” Will turned to Hannibal, and was startled by his nearness in a silence that came and went. There was that scent again. “So, who were you, before you died?”

“It’s not—” Hannibal surprised him by not having the words. His voice usually flowed like a gentle river, fed by melting snow. “There are some rooms in the memory palace that are forever locked. But that doesn’t mean I don’t hear the screams coming through the door when I pass by in the corridor.”

“What happened to you?” Will asked, something like pity blooming in his heart. Not pity. Empathy.

Hannibal turned away and sat back down again on the sofa. “Nothing happened to me. I happened.”

“Hannibal.” Will didn’t know what to say next, so he closed his mouth.

“Furthermore,” Hannibal said, “it’s a matter of mathematics. If you know how long I’ve lived, you’re going to multiply that by how many human lives I’ve taken to sustain myself over the centuries.”

Will bit the inside of his lip, the remnants of cigarettes and whisky bitter in the back of his throat.

“You said to me once that I had no right to be judge, jury, and executioner.”

“You don’t,” Will said, rubbing his bottom lip. “I still believe that. That’s why I didn’t want…” He sighed. “You told me there’s no morality, only morale. That… informs who you kill. But I know you’ve torn out throats for… for rudeness, Hannibal–”

“And you kill for righteousness. Where do you draw the line, Will?” Hannibal turned to him, honeyed eyebrows raised. “At what point does murder become justified?”

Will shook his head, closing his eyes briefly. This conversation was the same old same old, and it made him weary. “Don’t… don’t start. Besides, I, ah… I heard you don’t do that anymore.”

This seemed to surprise Hannibal, though it was betrayed only by a tiny movement of his forehead.

“The people in my camp keep pretty close tabs on you,” Will revealed, though he knew he shouldn’t. That little detail hadn’t been included in the agreement between the Daylight Inc. and this rogue vampire, who had agreed to kill his own kind for penance, to save his own life, and out of love. If he could feel love. Will wasn’t so sure it was possible. Without his consent, images of Abigail drowning in a pool of blood assaulted his mind’s eye.

According to Jack, it was impossible. Daylight Inc’s official stance was that vampires were soulless monsters. Will had been the first to suggest otherwise, and based on what had happened between Hannibal and him, the jury was still out. “They’ve seen how you operate. You don’t kill anymore.”

Hannibal nodded, and finally faced him again. “If that’s what it takes.”

Something flickered in Will’s brain, something that felt suspiciously like his empathy again. He tried to extinguish it, but it was a stubborn flame. “Doesn’t that make you weak?” he found himself asking, in a gentle voice that he almost didn’t recognize coming from between his own lips. “Puts you in, ah, in more *danger* ? I mean — you’re assassinating vampires, some far older than you, strong…”

“It does. But I have no choice in the matter.” Hannibal finally turned to face Will again, and settled back more easily onto the cushions. “What would you have me do?” He stood up and smoothed his tuxedo shirt. Will could tell he was agitated, because he undid his bowtie and let it hang around his neck. “I kill my own kind for you , Will. I spare human life for *you* . I forgive you, Will. Do you think you can forgive me?”

Will turned away. Hannibal’s expression was unbearable, the passion in those UnDead eyes. Will put a hand over his mouth and closed his eyes, ears overwhelmed by the sound of his own thudding heart, footsteps fleeing into silence.

“I am what I am now because of you, beloved.” Hannibal’s voice was just above a whisper. “You’ve changed me as much as I’ve changed you.”

Will could hear the tears in his voice. *If you’d asked me ten years ago,* he thought, *I would have told you that vampires are incapable of crying.*

He dropped his hand back to his side, and sat down next to Hannibal on the sofa. They both positioned themselves closer this time. Again, he tipped the whiskey bottle into his glass. “The night we first met,” he said, leaning back to study the amber liquid in the glass, “was a lot like this, wasn’t it?”

Hannibal smiled, a wistful little curve. “Jack and the others all gathered to welcome me to the facility for my first mission briefing. But you were nowhere to be found. Jack and I went next door to the theater to look for you. And we found you on a ladder, fiddling with chandelier wiring. I assumed you’d lost track of time, but then you made it clear you were less than pleased to have a vampire join the team.”

“Can’t you blame me?” Will sipped the whiskey, and then set his glass down on the coffee table next to the nearly-empty bottle.

“Explain to me.” Hannibal brushed his hair behind his ear. “How is tonight like that night? I don’t recall visiting one of the most exclusive casinos in the world or hunting down the same terrorist banker.”

“It was…” Will trailed off, his mind swimming in the memory, drenched in Hannibal’s nearness, his scent, the way the lights from outside played on his hair. His vision was blurred around the edges and things wouldn’t stay put when he tried to focus his eyes on them. This was utterly dangerous. What the fuck did he think he was doing? “I was afraid of you. Like tonight. Seeing you again, I-I’m… scared, I don’t…”

Hannibal waited in patient silence, though it stretched between them as thin and deadly as a garrotte wire.

“That night… I told Jack I wouldn’t work with you, and for you both to get the fuck out of my theater. But you said you wanted to get to know me, ask me questions. And that I could ask you anything.”

“I remember.”

Will leaned forward and picked up his glass, watching the liquor swirl against the crystal. “I don’t know what I was thinking that night. I knew what you were, and what you fed on to stay alive all these years. I knew Jack was making a mistake. And I invited you in anyway.” He laughed. It was short, bitter. “And I let my guard down. We stayed up until it was almost dawn, almost time for you to leave, and I just kept drinking and drinking.”

“You were letting your guard down on purpose,” Hannibal said, his voice neutral, though his eyes told a different story. “You made yourself vulnerable to me to see what I would do, given the chance.”

Will drained the whiskey. “And here we are again. Here we are again.” He set down the glass, and turned to Hannibal. “I don’t know why. You shouldn’t be here. You just… you shouldn’t be.”

“You’re right. I’ll go.” Hannibal stood and moved for the door.

“No,” Will erupted, his mouth again unchecked. Without realizing it, he’d gotten to his feet.

Hannibal turned around slowly, an inch at a time. “No?” he said softly.

Will swallowed, and exhaled through slightly parted lips. The air that passed between them felt a million miles away. *What the fuck do you think you’re doing?* his brain screamed at him. *Stop. Stop this now before you go too far. Before you get back in. How long did it take you to get out? Think about them, all the crimes going forward and backward in time, and think about her, her blank eyes staring up at the ceiling—*

“You should rest.” Hannibal took his elbow, his touch feather-light, and guided him through the pocket doors to the white-draped bed beyond. “Get some sleep. You have a big day tomorrow. A party on Le Chiffre’s yacht no less.”

“Maybe you should go instead.” He forced the words to have a sense of humor, of lightness. Will slipped off his shoes and socks, took off his vest and hung it up in the closet, and unbuttoned the cuffs of his shirt. “You’re the one who can act rich. I’m just some, ah… *peasant* , right?” He unbuckled his belt and draped it carefully next to his undone tie on a nearby chair.

Hannibal smiled, and Will tried not to relish the gentle curve of that irresistibly aristocratic mouth. He took off his watch and placed it on the bedside table next to his phone and the room key. The corners of his vision were still swimming, but a degree of sobriety had returned, the work of his preternatural Daywalker metabolism. He unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt. “You’d fit right in on that boat. Easy to sneak off and look for a laptop or a hard drive with all of Le Chiffre’s clients’ information on it.” He chuckles. “Y’know, if you ignore the eye, you look a little bit like him.”

“And you look like someone who’s used to violence,” Hannibal said, voice a silken caress, “and now you’re covering up what you used to be.” He bent and picked up Will’s tie, running the fabric between his ivory fingers. “Perhaps it’s because I know how many scars you’re hiding.” The world slowed as Will watched. Hannibal reached out and ran his knuckle down the side of Will’s dress shirt, from just below his nipple to his waistline.

Will shivered with sudden force, enough that he was sure Hannibal noticed. He held his breath for a moment before releasing it. “I should, uh, probably—”

Hannibal cut into him with his gaze, deeply intense and so unnaturally maroon. He looked impossibly hungry, gaunt even.

Hannibal reached out. Will moved back, but the back of his thigh hit the bed. Hannibal moved his fingers deftly, and in a blink, the rest of Will’s shirt buttons were undone. “I want to see them again,” Hannibal said. “Some of them are old friends.”

Sweat gathered on Will’s hairline and he touched his tongue to his bottom lip. “Some of them you gave me,” he said, almost without the breath to form the words.

“Because you wanted me to.” Hannibal eased the shirt off of his shoulders and tossed it on the chair. He ran his icy thumb gingerly over the shadow of teeth marks that marred the flesh just below Will’s collarbone on the right side. “You still want me to.”

Yes, his mind all but shouted. *Yes, God, yes.*

Had to fight it. “I didn’t ask to be *gutted* ,” he said, letting the hurt and the fury snap through his words as he covered the smile on his belly with a protective hand. The flesh ached in a sudden flare of agony. Even though his Daywalker physiology ensured he survived the gutting, and made a quick and full recovery, it still ached intermittently. Beverly said it the chronic pain was impossible, that every part of him was perfectly healed, back to the way it used to be. If that was the case, then the scar was a phantom limb.

“Will.” His name was even more gentle than the way Hannibal looked at him now as he moved Will’s hand away from the scar on his abdomen, the gesture laden with meaning.

“You need to go,” Will blurted, pulling his hand away, but leaving the scar open to attack. When Hannibal had gutted him, Will hadn’t fought back. He understood perfectly why it’d happened. The rejection of Hannibal’s gift. On some level, Will had felt like he deserved it.

Abigail, on the other hand…

“You need…” he tried again.

“You said you didn’t want me to go,” Hannibal reminded him, “because you don’t.” A pause. “Haven’t I always known what you wanted, even more than you knew yourself?”

“Hannibal—” Will turned, to walk out of the room, to break the spell, anything, but Hannibal’s stone-strong fingers curled around his wrist, gripping with such force for a moment that Will almost went to his knees. He grunted, struggled a bit, tried to pull his arm away. He might as well have been trying to pull his arm out of dried concrete.

Just for a moment. Then, Hannibal released his arm, and watched as Will rubbed the cold place where his hand had been. That message was clear enough. It was a reminder. Hannibal was a centuries-old vampire and made of the real stuff, not the Daywalker serum.

If he really wanted to, he could *take* without asking, and that thought arrested Will’s willpower in a matter of seconds.

Hannibal put a hand on Will’s throat, his thumb resting in the hollow at the top of his clavicle. “Your heart,” he murmured. Will could feel it thudding against the pressure of his fingers. “Is it fear?” He increased the pressure against Will’s shoulder and neck. Will put a hand around Hannibal’s wrist and tried to push his arm away, but it didn’t budge. “Or some other arousal?” Hannibal smiled, but just with his eyes. It was gentle and predatory simultaneously. “A little of both, I should think.” He paused. “Not going to order me to let you go? To leave?”

Will swallowed, his throat a desert. “Would you, if I did?”

“Of course. Rude to overstay one’s welcome.” Pause. “You forget I can hear your pulse, your breath, watch your eyes change. Still, I’d like to hear you say it. Say what you *really* want, Will. Don’t lie to me. Don’t lie to yourself.”

It’s too late, Will’s mind sighed. *Be proud of yourself. You put up a good fight. But you knew this was going to happen the very fucking second you saw him at the casino.*

Will spoke so softly, it couldn’t have been heard by human ears. “I want you… to do whatever *you* want. To me.”

Hannibal let go of him and took a half-step back. “Good,” he said. “Then do as I say. Lay down. Put your hands above your head, and close your eyes.”

And Will obeyed.

Giving in felt incredible. Answering the call of the dark chasm that lived in his mind was the most natural thing in the world. Beautiful. It all fell out of his hands now. Hannibal was

inevitable. Will had been stupid to think otherwise.

In the soft blackness of the backside of his eyelids, all of his senses — or, his sense, as in good sense, as in instinct — told him he was in danger, lying supine, tender throat and scarred belly exposed. Hannibal's unmistakable perfume was everywhere, and he felt the vampire's corpse-cold fingertips trail over his bare chest a moment. Then, something silky and serpentine wound around his wrists, soft against his skin, but almost uncomfortably tight, binding them together. Cool metal against his palm a minute, and then the cold unforgiveness of leather.

"Open your eyes."

Will obeyed.

Hannibal stood over him, stripped to his waist, shoes off. Will looked up to see his hands tied to the antique wrought iron headboard with his tie and belt. He tested their strength. The headboard groaned in protest, and if he tried hard enough he might be able to separate it from the bedframe and escape. In time. But the time for any sort of escape was over. Hannibal was leaning over him now, climbing onto the bed.

Hannibal traced his cold fingers lightly over Will's forehead, and caressed his cheek with the side of his knuckles. His lips had gone rosy, perhaps in anticipation. "I find myself questioning my perceived reality," he said, voice husky, hushed, as his hand traveled down over Will's throat. "It's been so long, beloved." Hannibal leaned in. Will closed his eyes to savor the layered sensations of the kiss, the first one in over three years. God, he'd missed this. Missed *him* . Hannibal's lips and tongue were polite only for the first second or two before plunging against and inside Will's mouth, filling Will's body with a deep and twisted thrill, the kind only Hannibal could give him.

Hannibal pulled back to look at him again, stroking his face. Then he slid his hand down between Will's legs, cupping his swiftly-hardening cock where it strained in the suit trousers. He kissed Will's bruised mouth tenderly now as he rubbed Will's outline with a loving familiarity. Will couldn't keep quiet, straining against his bonds as his back arched.

Hannibal's eyes glowed from within, highlighting their preternatural red tones, and Will felt the delicious cocktail of fear and erotic anticipation he'd been craving since they'd separated. It made his veins go molten. Hannibal gently slid off his trousers for him, and hung them up carefully in the suite's little closet. He left Will's boxer-briefs on, however – not his usual cheap blue Hanes, the suit trousers too tight and made of a material that would have shown their outline.

Hannibal returned to the bedside and undressed the rest of the way, Will's eyes capturing his every graceful move, searching his body in the soft light to see if there were any changes.

None. Vampires didn't scar. Didn't change, their bodies frozen in time.

Hannibal crawled onto the bed again, gently bending Will's straightened leg and parting his knees to kneel between them. He took his time, pausing to caress Will's calves, stroking his thighs with hands that could barely conceal their greed. He bent and put his lips against

Will's hip as he continued to tease through Will's undergarment. It always caught him off guard that Hannibal's tongue was cool, the texture closer to velvet than anything else. Will delighted in the shiver that trembled through him as Hannibal kissed and licked along the line of his underwear before pulling them down, backing off enough to draw them off and set them aside in a strangely gentlemanly gesture.

Hannibal paused again, gazing at Will's cock, as if seeing it for the first time. Yet he tore his attention away, and looked Will in the eye instead, bypassing the obvious target and leaning in to touch the scar along Will's stomach instead. "Fate and circumstance brought us to that moment three years ago, when the teacup shattered," he said, eyes bloody with sudden tears. Hannibal bent forward as if in worshipful supplication, and kissed the scar, running his tongue from one side to the other. Will gave a sharp sigh and twisted his hands in the belt and tie. Not to escape – he could, more than likely, if he wanted to. The binding was more symbolic than anything.

But Will accepted, in that moment, that he didn't want to escape. That in the end, there was no escape and there never would be. And maybe that was just fine.

"I forgive you, Will," Hannibal whispered against the scar, almost as if Will were pregnant, and he was speaking to the unborn child. Tears gathered in Will's eyes as well. "Can you forgive me?"

A tear spilled from the corner of each eye. "Yes," he said.

"I love you." Hannibal's words were cool and soothing against the hot, taut, nerveless line of scar tissue. The ache behind the ruined flesh uncoiled and Will was overcome with a kind of released relief.

"I'm glad you're here," Will said softly.

Hannibal looked up at him, and smiled, wider than usual, giving him a clear view of the fierce white canines that hid amongst his other ivory teeth, just a little longer than a human's, and a thousand times sharper. He ran his hands along the defined lines of Will's hip bones, and lowered his lips again. Will's breath rushed out of his chest as Hannibal's teeth penetrated the skin of his right hip, and the flash of pain lit up his nerves. Hannibal timed the bite with stroking his cock, bringing back its fullness, and Will turned his head into his bicep to muffle the sound of agonized ecstasy, this pain so sharply beautiful compared to the coiled ache that had hidden in his scar for so long.

He could feel Hannibal's mouth over the wound, sucking. The unmistakable smell of blood wafted up to Will's nose, mingling with Hannibal's succulent scent.

Just a small mouthful. Hannibal leaned back, his eyes closed, tongue stealing out to swipe a ruby droplet from his princely mouth. Will felt a shudder go through him, akin to that brought about by an orgasm.

When the wave seemed to have passed, he put his fingers in the blood that trickled from the bite mark, and touched them to his mouth. He trembled again and bowed his head. "I never thought I'd taste you again," he whispered after a long, prayerful moment. Hannibal leaned

over to run his hand through Will's hair, combing the curls back with loving strokes. "I'm dreaming. This can't be real."

"When I was in Siberia, I dreamed about you every night," Will confessed, "and I counted the hours until the day was over so I could see you again, but I'd always wake up before you touched me - oh God..."

Hannibal put his mouth to the soft spot over Will's floating ribs, and bit him again, harder this time. Pain exploded, and Will gasped, pulling at his bonds. The bed frame groaned, but did not budge. The sharpness of the bite ebbed away as Hannibal put his mouth over it, his tongue a balm, and worked Will's cock through his fist, thumbing the slit, coating the length with the pearls that had already escaped.

"Fuck," Will gasped, arching his back against where Hannibal's body had him trapped against the bed. The belt buckle gave out and the leather slithered down one of his arms. "Let me go. I want to touch you. Untie me."

"Patience, beloved" Hannibal licked the wound again, and crawled closer to kiss him, teasing him with a bloody tongue, before pulling away, tantalizingly out of reach. He traced his red-stained fingers across Will's collarbone, fingering a ring of faint scars that circled it. "I love this part of your body," he uttered quietly, trailing his fingers along the two sides of Will's clavicle, kissing where they came together, stroking his neck. "Everything about you is hard and dangerous, except for right here." Hannibal came down and sank his pointed teeth into one of the old scars, making a new entry into history, adding to the cartography of their cruel but inescapable love. Will breathed deeply through the saturating pain and pleasure.

"I've craved you, beloved," he breathed, eyes fiercely alight, bloody tongue stealing out to taste the leaking head of Will's cock. "I suffer an emptiness without you. Your blood in my veins, opening doors to the chambers of my heart. Having you inside me." He bent to envelop Will's cock in his mouth, his interior wet and soft but always cool enough to give Will a little shiver before the suction began. Will groaned, then ran his teeth over the edge of his bottom lip as he watched Hannibal reach behind to finger himself in time to the movements of his head.

He teased Will to the brink with his masterful oral, his reflex-less throat, and the titillating threat of his razor teeth. Will whimpered when Hannibal' stopped but was rewarded when the vampire positioned himself to sink down on his cock with a slow but steady movement. Hannibal tilted his head back, mouth open slightly, eyes closed in revelation, a saint in the throes of a holy vision as he enveloped Will's cock entirely within his body.

Will bent his knees and Hannibal reached back to grab one of his legs, holding it at the crook as he began to ride Will in earnest. Will delighted in the way the position forced Hannibal to extend his torso, letting the soft light of the nearby lamp fully illuminate his defined chest, glimmering in his curly body hair. He used his free hand to caress Will's scar or stroke his own cock. Will twisted his wrists in the necktie as Hannibal fucked himself faster, carefully styled hair falling over his forehead.

The previous edging back and forth actually helped Will last longer, and his vampire lover was able to chase and catch his pleasure. Will took in a sight he had desperately missed –

Hannibal's face when he came, so wanton, sinful, and delicately aristocratic at the same time. The sight alone pitched Will over the edge and his own orgasm crashed through him like a derailed train.

When they'd returned to earth, Hannibal put a hand in Will's hair, the other palm supporting him as he leaned down, blocking out the delicate light that came through the window from the city below. "How much?" he whispered into Will's ear, his cold breath rustling against his cheek.

"I told you to do whatever you wanted. Take what you want."

Lips against his ear. "Thank you." Pause, as Hannibal's hair fell against Will's cheek. "Will..."

Will closed his eyes as Hannibal's teeth pierced his throat with precision, hitting a smaller artery instead of the jugular vein. His mouth formed over the wound and he drank in full force. Will felt as if tiny fish hooks dug into his veins and tore them upward toward his neck. His breath went flat in his lungs and he saw silver flashes explode over his vision, a fireworks show on the back of his eyelids. He gripped the bed frame as an accompanying wave of force rolled through him in a tidal rush of pleasure, the aftershock of his orgasm.

Just before he felt consciousness slipping away, Hannibal pulled back gazed down at him with feral eyes, blood dripping from his mouth. Will blacked out with his eyes fixed on those rubied lips.

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Will stirred when Hannibal managed to release the last knot from the now mangled silk necktie. As they lay face to face on the bed, Hannibal massaged the red skin of Will's wrists, kissed the tender spots. Already, the irritation was fading, but not as fast as it should have. Will's regenerative abilities were slowed when he'd been bled, but time would replace what Hannibal had taken.

He held Will's cold hands against his now-warm chest and reached out to stroke his lover's cheek, seeming to relish the feel of his stubble. "Wake up, my love," he said softly.

Will blinked a few times. "How long was I out?" he whispered.

"Not long," Hannibal promised, tucking Will's hair behind his ear. "You'll have to tell the maid you had a hell of a nosebleed."

Will looked down at the dried blood on his chest and the maroon drops on the duvet beneath them. His rueful laugh was absorbed when Hannibal kissed him again. "We're a mess," he said, "the two of us."

Hannibal's smile told Will that he knew Will meant the phrase in more ways than the obvious. "Things have always been complicated between us."

“Shit, what time is it?” Will turned to pick up his watch, emitting a small groan of discomfort as his torn skin stretched. “You should go.” He turned back to Hannibal. “It’ll be dawn soon.”

Hannibal lowered his head onto Will’s shoulder and wrapped himself tightly against his bare, bloodied chest. Will put his arms around him. “I’d rather stay,” Hannibal said. “Tonight was perfect. Tomorrow you might take back your forgiveness and run from me again. Shatter the teacup.” He sighed softly, falling silent. Then, “I may as well burn now. The teacup’s reassembled. Time reversed.”

Will squeezed him tighter, closer. “But that’s not what I want.”

Hannibal sat up and looked at him. “Don’t say it unless you mean it,” he warned.

“You told me tonight that I should tell you what I want, what I *truly* want. Well, now I’m telling you. I don’t want you to burn,” Will insisted. He sighed, rubbing a hand through his wild hair. “I don’t know… *how* this is going to work. Jack and Daylight… it’s complicated, like you said. I don’t know what’ll happen. But I do know that you better get inside somewhere where the sun can’t reach. Or I’ll drag you to the basement of this place myself.”

“You couldn’t drag a kitten anywhere right now.” Hannibal pushed him down again easily and kissed him, long, deep, yet carefully. His teeth, after all.

Ah, too late. One of his evil little canines sliced the inside of Will’s lower lip. He heard Hannibal’s breath quicken again as he sucked on it for a long moment.

“Sleep now,” he said, rising with apparent reluctance from Will’s side. “I’ll be back soon.”

With that, he put on his clothes, and went out into the living room. Will heard the terrace door open and shut. And just like that, he was gone.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

> He ran his fingers through Will's hair and nodded. "Take your clothes off. Slowly. I want to see you." He slid back and pushed himself up higher on the pillows, good eye alight.

Aboard the *Andiamo* — December, 2021

Dinner had been excellent — local fish, fresh greens, artisanal bread, plenty of wine — so, Will thought, the evening hadn't been a total waste. He hadn't been able to sit long enough next to Le Chiffre's higher-up – a man known as Mr. White – to activate the spyware on his phone designed to dig out information about which vampires Spectre was bankrolling. Still, tomorrow was another day. There was an upcoming New Years Eve party, at least. He'd already been invited. Hopefully White wouldn't be ping-ponging around the yacht the whole night chatting up socialites and models, or Will could sneak off and look for Le Chiffre's laptop.

Guests, some of them stumbling, headed for the gangplank that would deposit them in the center of Monte Carlo, where cabs were already waiting to take them back to their hotels. Valenka, the blonde from the casino, stood by the exit, graciously bidding everyone goodnight, as if she didn't see them all as possible customers or rubes. Being in the right society was important – Le Chiffre had to be invited to some of the more exclusive off-the-books gambling events around the world; knowing the right people was essential.

Will took his time finishing his drink to be one of the last to leave. Cultivating Le Chiffre and his lover/henchwoman had gotten him this far, and it was a relationship that needed to be maintained. This was his fourth time in the last nine days being invited to the yacht for a party of some kind. They'd discussed some business, though not extensively. Good, because Will's arms dealer cover story wasn't solid enough to undergo major scrutiny. He just needed an opportunity to get those files.

"Goodnight, Valenka, thank you for having me." He kissed both of her cheeks, and then her knuckles. She didn't let go, waving goodbye to the last few guests with one hand, but keeping his fingers in a tight grip with the other.

When the last of the partygoers were securely on shore, she turned to him. "Don't go yet," she said, tucking a stray straw-colored hair behind her ear. Her deep red nails glimmered in the Christmas lights that lined the railings of the yacht. "It's still early."

“Sure.” He let her lead him inside the glass-walled dining area to a semi-circle of sunken couches done in tasteful blue and white. This was where Le Chiffre waited, and Will saw the ghost of a smile curve up the edge of his mouth.

Will had seen the staff leave not long before the guests. By his estimation, only Valenka, Le Chiffre, and the skeleton crew needed to operate the yacht were aboard.

Will slipped behind the bar. “What can I get you?” he asked, rummaging through bottles of liquor.

“Nothing for me, or I’ll have a headache tomorrow,” Valenka said, slipping off the evergreen evening wrap she wore over a strappy dress of the same color. Will caught the briefly-shared glance between her and Le Chiffre’s good eye. He emoted command. She gave back disdain, though it was hidden behind seven veils.

“I’m afraid I have to say goodnight.”

“You sure?” Will asked. “Night’s young.”

But she was already gone with a swish of her beaded wrap, headed down the hall to the staterooms.

A warning sounded in Will’s mind. Clearly Le Chiffre had asked her to stop him from leaving and bring him back once the rest of the guests were gone. Were they onto him? He’d been so careful, asking only the vaguest questions. Maybe he’d been too obvious trying to stand close to White…?

“Surprise me,” came the accented voice.

“Hmm?” *Shit,* he thought. *Do they know, or don’t they?*

“The drink,” Le Chiffre said, loosening his tie, which was black, of course – in all of the surveillance pictures Will had ever seen of him, and these few nights in person, he’d only worn black. Made sorting the laundry easy, anyway. “Surprise me.”

“All right.” Will went to work with a smile, careful to keep his face arranged, putting several different bottles on the bar, and helping himself to ice and sugar. Le Chiffre watched him with a contented expression that put Will at ease as he carefully cut the lemon. “We hardly had a moment to speak tonight, Mr. Devereaux.”

“You were playing host,” Will said, muddling the sugar and bitters in a glass before adding French cognac and ice. “It was good for me to mingle. I’m not always, uhm… as *sociable* as I should be.”

“There’s always New Year’s Eve for that.”

Will came over with two glasses on a tray and offered them. Le Chiffre took one, and waited until Will joined him on the sofa to sip it. “Mmm. What is this?”

“Sazerac,” he said. “The official cocktail of New Orleans.”

Le Chiffre took another appreciative sip. “You’ve been all over, haven’t you? Russia, New Orleans, France…”

“I go where the work takes me,” he said, tasting his own drink. Damn good, if he did say so himself. “I’m lucky when it takes me somewhere nice. Like tonight.”

Le Chiffre smiled then, still subdued, but more genuine. He looked younger when he smiled, less dangerous, despite the marred eye and severe black clothing, his slicked hair and razor cheekbones. Maybe not younger. Younger implied that he looked tired, or used up in some way. That wasn’t the case. When he smiled, he seemed less monolithic, like someone who could still experience a genuine emotion aside from greed. Maybe it was thelighting. The room was softly lit by a few recessed lamps, and a large Christmas tree in the corner covered with matching blue and white lights and silvery ornaments.

Now, Le Chiffre stood and stepped over to the tree to pick up an ornament knocked to the floor by a tipsy guest and rehang it in its place. Will went to his side as he straightened some of the other ornaments. “It’s fake,” he said, stroking the plastic needles of the tree.

“You can barely tell,” Will said. “It smells real.”

“These little secrets.” He pointed to evergreen scent sticks that had been hidden in the metal boughs. “Are you a man of faith, Mr. Devereaux? Enjoying the season for the spiritual aspect?”

Will chuckled, sipping his drink. “No. I’m a capitalist. And an atheist.”

Le Chiffre nodded appreciatively. “A kindred spirit,” he said, moving a silver ornament to another branch. “When I was a boy in Albania, religion was outlawed. The world’s first atheist country. Churches and mosques were destroyed or converted into sports arenas or warehouses. My mother used to whisper the secrets of Christianity to me at night, and at Christmastime she painted a tree on the floor under my bed. I would fall asleep knowing it was there.”

The golden pendulum in Will’s mind whirred, showing him this cruel and formidable man’s point of view, transporting him to a shabby house in Elbasan where a smiling boy and his mother, a wan and exhausted creature, painted a Christmas tree on the floor of the tiny bedroom they shared. Their eyes shining, Le Chiffre’s both whole and bright. Will leaned into the feeling. If he was going to manipulate this man, he had to connect with him, as disgusting as it was to empathize with someone who helped bankroll the September 11th terrorist attacks.

Le Chiffre had no ideology. He believed in money, stoically lived in its service because it gave him everything he’d longed for during his austere childhood, his dreams caged by communism and atheism, where there was no hope or magic in the world except that given to him in secret by his mother. A mother he was certainly now supporting in the grandest style now that Albania was a republic. At Christmas, he probably sent piles of gifts, had the staff set up a splendid tree in every room of the house for the old woman to enjoy.

It filled Will with a soft, loving warmth, picturing those trees, and seeing Le Chiffre now standing next to his own, the lights glimmering in his eyes, sharp and defined in one, and like cloud-filtered sunlight in the other.

Careful, Will's mind warned as Le Chiffre adjusted another ornament. *Don't go too deep. Thousands of people are dead because of this man. He believes in nothing. All sacrifices are acceptable for a reasonable rate of return.*

There is no morality. Only morale. Hannibal's voice in his head.

Were they so different? Two monsters capable of incredible violence, with love on the other side of that coin?

Will shoved everything from his mind with such force he felt dizzy for a moment. Le Chiffre was looking at him, as if expecting him to speak.

"It's beautiful," Will said, taking another drink. He wasn't lying. The ornaments were curated, similar in aesthetic but clearly from different places, different eras, and it complemented the nautical decor of the yacht perfectly. "You decorated this yourself." Statement, not a question.

Le Chiffre's pale brows raised. Ah. He'd done it, yes, but late at night when everyone was asleep, or early in the morning. Let Valenka and his other henchmen think the staff had taken care of it. "I think you'd make a very good poker player, Mr. Devereaux. You're a student of tells, I should think."

Will affected a kind of *aw shucks* smile that often charmed people, men in particular. "I just… understand you, I guess." He deployed the weaponized smile again. "When I was growing up in Louisiana, we didn't have a pot to piss in, y'know, so, ah… holidays were…" He rubbed the back of his neck, drawing his fingers along it just a touch slower than normal. Success. Le Chiffre's multi-colored gaze flicked to his hand before returning to his face. "Might've been different if my mom was around to sorta cheer things up." He polished off his Sazerac, the ache in his chest unfeigned.

"I see." Le Chiffre finished his drink as well, and leaned down to pick up a gaily wrapped package from beneath the tree. "Sit down. I have something for you."

"What?"

That smug little smile again, the one Will had seen as he'd watched Le Chiffre pull piles of poker chips towards himself at the casino after a particularly profitable hand. "Go on."

They returned to the couch, and Le Chiffre handed him the box. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Devereaux."

He didn't have to feign his surprise. "I didn't get you anything."

"There's still time," Le Chiffre said, leaning back and sliding his tie open, leaving it draped around his collar. "I understand you may find the sentiment premature, considering the

newness of our acquaintance. But I wanted to, and I get what I want."

"I'm, ah… I'm sure you do," Will said, shaking his head with a chuckle, teasing the gilded bow on the scarlet package. "I gotta say, you didn't strike me as a Christmas guy," he noted, sliding the ribbon off of the box.

"In the modern world, especially in your America, Christmas is the worship of wealth. I understand it very well."

"Fair assessment." Inside the box was a thick pair of headphones, top quality noise canceling, so designer they came in a fur-lined wooden box. They were a rich shade of brushed bronze and Will couldn't be certain, but the accents were probably real gold.

"Last weekend, when the band came to play on the boat, I could tell you love music," Le Chiffre said, taking the box and lifting the headphones out. "Your whole body changes, your face, when you hear it. These will help you hear it as though the musicians are right in the room with you."

"Thank you, that's really…" Will shook his head, almost in disbelief. "It's perfect." He looked into his mismatched eyes. "My face really changes?"

"It does. More relaxed. You seem happier."

"You're a student of tells, too."

Le Chiffre's smile and tilt of his head said, *well, obviously.*

"Thank you. It's… unexpected. I'd say you shouldn't have, but clearly you're one of those rare ones that gets real joy out of, ah… *spoiling* people."

"You're a perceptive man, James." It was the first time he'd called Will by the fake first name he'd been using. Will had avoided using names every time he'd spoken to Le Chiffre, because the banker never gave one aside from his mysterious alias. Of course he knew the international criminal's real name, but couldn't use it until he'd been told, or he'd blow his cover.

Le Chiffre took the box from Will and set it on the couch, then stood, and held out a hand. "Come. I want to show you something else, since we're in a festive mood."

Will took the offered hand, and even though Le Chiffre let go after just a moment, the warm press of flesh spoke.

Hannibal's voice again. *Touch gives the world an emotional context.*

Will hadn't seen Hannibal since the night they'd reconnected, but in some way, he could feel him, his nearness. Will would have bet everything he had that Hannibal was still in Monaco. Perhaps waiting until the mission was over? Either way, it was for the best that they hadn't crossed paths again. Daylight couldn't know that they'd seen each other. Jack had given Hannibal strict orders to stay away from Will. If he didn't, he'd face the full force of Daylight

Inc and its new pack of Daywalkers led by Nigel, who would be more than happy to hunt Hannibal down.

Stop thinking about him, Will warned himself. *Head in the game, Graham, head in the fucking game.*

Le Chiffre led him deeper into the ship, down softly-lit carpeted hallways, past nondescript doors that likely opened into lavish cabins. At the end of the hall were two staterooms. The door to the one on the right was closed. Valenka's. So they didn't share a bed, interesting. Le Chiffre ushered him through the other door. The suite beyond was done in neutral colors, except for the accent wall behind the bed, which was painted to look like an abstract version of the night sky.

This was clearly Le Chiffre's room, strangely humanizing, with skin and hair care products by the bathroom sink and his tuxedo jacket hanging on the closet door. On the counter next to the built in TV sat another small Christmas tree decked in twinkling lights.

"Close the door."

Will did, his heart ticking up a notch. Well, this was what he'd wanted, right? Will felt he was about to find out exactly what he was willing to do to do to bring this man down, to cut off vampires all over the world from their money? Bloodsuckers couldn't buy harems or pay for private jets with no cash flow. Mason Verger himself would be in trouble. Now that Mason was a vampire, he'd left the management of his livestock companies to corporate toadies who were, according to Daylight's reports, slowly running the businesses into the ground as they lined their own pockets. *While the cat's away, mice will play* , Jack had said. Without Le Chiffre and Mr. White, the Verger inheritance would be gone soon enough, especially as other vampires came to Mason for help when their own accounts disappeared. But before any of that could happen, Will had to steal the records, the names and banks and account numbers.

And in order to get ahold of that laptop on the desk in the stateroom, the one he was looking at right now, without blowing the whole mission and giving White a chance to cover his tracks, he had to get Le Chiffre to trust him.

Touch gives the world an emotional context. The touch of others makes us who we are. It builds trust.

Will's pulse quickened a half-step. When he killed, it was steadier, or beat only as a result of physical exertion. Vampire slaying could be tiring work, but this undercover shit, using the ambient pulse in his mind, the golden strand of empathy pulled taut with constant use, that frayed him down to nothing. He wasn't sure what was supposed to happen next, and what it might do to the delicate web he was weaving.

"The night the band came, and they played a song you knew." Le Chiffre slid his tie from around his neck and opened the closet to hang it up. "I heard you singing."

Unexpected. Will had seen and done a lot of shit in his life, and despite the character he'd crafted for himself in this situation, he blushed. "Yeah," he said, sticking his hands in his

pockets as he lingered by the door. “It was one that I knew. Bruce Springsteen – *Atlantic City.*
”

“You have a beautiful voice.” Le Chiffre removed his jacket next to hang. “Why are you not singing all the time?”

“I used to.” That was the truth. If Hannibal earned it, of course. And anytime Abigail had asked. But Abigail’s death had murdered his voice, and the years of separation had buried it. He was surprised he’d gotten a few lines of the chorus of *Atlantic City* to come out. Something had shaken his vocal cords loose in the past couple of weeks, and he had a pretty good idea not what, but *who* it was.

Le Chiffre slipped off his shoes and crossed the room to where Will stood at the end of the stateroom’s bed, an expanse of inviting white duvet. A tiny drop of blood slipped out of his injured eye. He made no move to wipe it away, but said, “It’s not a tell. It happens intermittently, beyond my body’s conscious or unconscious control.”

Lie. Will sensed it, found it as plain on Le Chiffre’s face as the drop of red against his skin. Something had this man agitated, but it wasn’t losing at poker. His suspicion was confirmed when Le Chiffre curled a hand around Will’s shoulder, his fingers dimpling the shoulder of the black blazer he wore over a thin gray Henley. Will’s eyes fixed on the ruby drop, his mind white noise as his host cupped his face, the hand warm and human, drawing Will’s mouth to his own for what was much more than a kiss between European friends.

Use it. Jack’s voice in his head, said in the same tone he’d used to growl, *you need to cut that part out.* It spread a cruel frost over his heart and cleared his mind, focusing the empathy pulse again.

He separated their lips even as Le Chiffre inched their bodies closer together. “I don’t even know your *real* name.” Vulnerable. Like he might develop feelings. A Christmas miracle.

“Jean.” There it was, the beginning of trust.

“What about Valenka?” Oh, this was almost too easy. He could sense all of Le Chiffre’s walls crashing down to the trumpet of Will’s feigned reluctance. “She’s been, ah… really great. And I *like* you. I want to keep getting to know you. If we do this—”

“You think she’ll be jealous.” Le Chiffre smiled, the expression losing is usual chill, and shook his head knowingly. “Valenka and I understand each other very well.” He edged closer again and inclined his head, pressing his mouth gently on Will’s neck, then the side of his face. “No matter how business fares, I always find a way to treat myself to a gift in honor of the season.” He drew back and traced his fingers lightly along Will’s hairline, combing back an errant curl, then traced the curve of his jaw, feeling his stubble. “I told her my intentions. You’re a clever man, James, surely you noticed her assistance in keeping you on the boat.”

Will rested his hands gingerly on Jean’s hips. “It’s a risk, though, isn’t it? Mixing business with pleasure?”

“Not in my experience.”

All right, then. Will let him push the jacket from his shoulders and kiss him again with a kind of Christmas morning enthusiasm. Will did some unwrapping of his own, opening the black buttons on Jean's shirt. Le Chiffre paused to undo his own cuffs, then hurried out of the garment, pushing up Will's shirt to grope his abdominals and lower back before pulling him onto the bed. Will got on top, moving his lips from Jean's down his neck, to the rise of collarbone, stroking his fingers through his manicured chest hair. Jean yanked him forward by the hips and fumbled hungrily with the buckle of his belt.

Will took his hands and pushed them gently away. "This is your gift," he said softly, gathering the monster's face in his hands and kissing the blood tear that had made its way to his cheek. "It's about you, not me."

Just as the empathy pulse had predicted, the action broke off pieces of the Le Chiffre mask, revealing the man beneath, the person the penniless Albanian boy had become in his world without God or magic or hope, the hungry one.

He ran his fingers through Will's hair and nodded. "Take your clothes off. Slowly. I want to see you." He slid back and pushed himself up higher on the pillows, good eye alight.

Will got off the bed and stood at the end of it. He eased up the bottom hem of his thin sweater before drawing it over his head and letting it fall. Holding Jean's gaze even as he was the object of it, he reached behind his head and grasped the plain black tee shirt he'd been wearing beneath, taking care not to whip it off too quickly.

No poker face for Le Chiffre now, not seeing Will's smooth, well-defined chest and taut middle, the kind of body a gym rat would work on for hours with only protein shakes and kale to survive on. Will earned the physique by training and fighting and killing, aided always by the Daylight serum. Now he was weaponizing his body in another way, it seemed, and he had to admit, it made him feel powerful. He remembered the same feeling with Hannibal, how he could use his physical form to reduce the polished gentleman vampire into a writhing mess of desire or bring out the savage beast within.

Next came his shoes, socks, belt, and pants, leaving him in his nondescript blue boxers. He would have worn a better pair if he'd thought this was going to happen tonight.

"Come here," Le Chiffre ordered. Will crawled over the bed toward him, and Jean grabbed him by the shoulders greedily, running his hands up and down his abs and chest. He kissed Will ardently again, then moved him back so he was on his knees within reach. "Look at all of them," Le Chiffre said, tilting his head to get a better view with his good eye, tracing his finger along the scars that marred Will's ribs, his collarbone. Some of them were pink and fresh, and Will hoped they didn't look too much like bite marks.

"Motorcycle accident," he lied. "I learned the hard way to wear a leather jacket."

He wasn't sure Le Chiffre believed him; Willneeded a distraction. Leaning in, he kissed Jean again, a sensual press. "Can I ask… what happened to your eye?"

"Where I grew up," Jean revealed, running his hand through Will's hair, "the streets weren't safe. I kept a knife on me. One day I was attacked by other boys for the few coins in my

pocket. I tried to use the knife to defend myself. Instead, it was used on me."

The pendulum squirmed in Will's mind, a skeleton key of manipulation. "I think it's beautiful," he whispered reverently.

"James." It was a shame, really, how sweetly he whispered a name that was nothing but a lie. It gave Will a tingle of righteous zest as the man's vulnerability layered itself over images of burning buildings and New Yorkers jumping to their deaths.

"Let me…" Will backed up and slid off Jean's thin black socks, pausing to push up the hems of his trousers one at a time to kiss his feet, ankles, calves. Jean stared at him with mismatched, hooded eyes, lips parted, unbuckling his belt and unzipping his fly. Will pulled on his pant legs and slid them off, giving him access to Le Chiffre's taut thighs. These he kissed, stroking the finer hairs here, before nuzzling his face up against the unmistakable bulge in Jean's black briefs. When he breathed on it through the fabric, testing its dimensions with his mouth, Jean sucked in a breath and tilted his head back. Will's fingers grazed the waistband. "Can I take these off?"

"Yes, yes," Jean breathed.

For all Le Chiffre's influence internationally, Will found it a little ironic that his cock wasn't bigger. Average, maybe? Smaller than Will himself, though not by a lot. But Will was biased, surely – used to Hannibal, who's size and length fit him perfectly, and Nigel, who was quite well-endowed. Still, it made sucking and deepthroating easier.

Will had thought for sure he'd read Le Chiffre perfectly, and was about to get a shot in the mouth, but Jean surprised him by guiding him away and stripping off Will's boxers, bringing them skin to skin in the kind of embrace that Will knew all too well – one starved for real intimacy. Jean rolled over on top of him, pumping Will's cock through his fist, an appreciative glow in his good eye. He propped himself up on one hand and held the undersides of their lengths together, gathering beads of precum and anointing each, then began to thrust. It was right around this time when Will heard the engines of the yacht fire to life. It wasn't, however, an opportune time to mention his observation. It wouldn't be for the next quarter of an hour or so after they'd finished, either.

In order to orgasm, Will had closed his eyes and thought of Hannibal. Imagined the feel of his cold hands on Will's body, the sting of his bite and the soothing balm of his tongue, the way he said Will's name like a prayer. Will saw him now as a shadow figure with fierce red eyes glowing like the coals of hell, demonic stag antlers growing from his head, princely lips pulled back to expose his double rows of fangs. Le Chiffre had winked out of existence as the doors to the memory palace flew open and surrounded Will with the whirlwind force of Hannibal's imago. *Beloved.*

Now that it was over, they'd closed again, and Will had bolted them securely. This was essential for him to maintain his cover as James Devereaux, who had never met Hannibal Lecter VIII.

Jean let Will take care of him after, bringing washcloths from the ensuite bathroom and accepting an offered cigarette. Will lay next to him, one leg over Jean's, Le Chiffre's hand

running languidly up and down his inner thigh. The usually taciturn banker had lots of pillow talk, and some of it was information Daylight could use.

At last, the conversation slowed, and they smoked in silence. Jean broke it after a time. “I don’t often welcome men into my bed. I find their egos tiresome.”

Will chuckled. “Ain’t that the truth.”

“You surprise me, James—”

The door to the cabin opened, and Valenka stepped in. She’d changed into black leggings and a yellow tank top, a leather jacket thrown over. It was as casual as Will had ever seen her. And something in her face wasn’t right. Will felt the muscles in his body quiver and coil. Slowly, he sat up, stubbing his smoke in the ashtray on the bedside table.

“You’re interrupting,” Jean said, making no attempt to cover himself, turning on a dime and diving back into the cold arithmetic of his Le Chiffre mask.

Valenka paused, blue-gray eyes flicking from Will to Le Chiffre. “I’m sorry,” she said, voice calm in comparison to the anxiety she radiated. “I should have knocked. I see you got what you wanted for Christmas.”

“He told me it was all right with you,” Will said carefully, sliding down to the edge of the bed.

“Of course it was. I’m sorry to intrude.” She locked eyes with Le Chiffre, her mouth firm. “You have a *phone call* .”

Jean sighed, sliding out of bed. Making no attempt at modesty, he strolled over to the closet and pulled on a pair of silk pajama pants – black, of course – and slid his feet into a pair of yacht shoes. He turned to Will. “I’ll be right back. Keep the bed warm for me.”

“Don’t be long,” Will said, watching them go, the ambient pulse working busily.

“I won’t be,” Jean promised, giving him a lingering look.

Will put out his cigarette and found his clothes and phone, depositing them in a pile closer to his side of the bed, just in case.

Le Chiffre wasn’t gone long, as promised. He opened the door and stepped in but didn’t return to the bed. “Come have a drink with me, James. Mr. White called. He’s on the line now and wants to talk business. No time like the present.”

Every nerve in Will’s body was suddenly on guard. Something bad was going to happen, and soon. There was a presence on the boat of something UnDead, maybe two — something his mind hadn’t picked up on with his mental attention turned on using it to read Jean for expert manipulation as well as staying in character.

Will got dressed. As he passed Le Chiffre to step out into the hallway, Jean stopped him. Kissed him once. It was chaste, but lasted a long time.

A kiss goodbye.

All right then.

Will turned and walked down the hallway, past the cabin doors, headed for the bar and the deck beyond, Jean walking a few steps behind him, conspicuously silent.

“Here we go,” Will whispered to himself.

Just as he stepped out of the cabin hallway to the bar and lounge area with the Christmas tree, someone stuck a gun in his face. A human someone, luckily, and Will was faster. In one practiced gesture, Will shoved the gun to one side before his assailant could pull the trigger, and kicked him hard enough in his midsection that he stumbled backward, sprawling out on the pool table.

As Will reached for one of the cues on the rack on the wall, a bullet grazed past his ribcage, slicing him to the bone. Another man with a thick neck, wearing the basic black suit and white shirt of hired muscle stepped forward with a silver pistol leveled at him. Before he could fire again, Will smashed the pool cue into his hand. The shot went wild. Will took two long steps and swung the thick end of the cue in an upward arc. It caught the mercenary in the chin and he crashed to the ground, unconscious. Will scooped up his pistol and turned it on Le Chiffre, who was kneeling down to pick up the other man’s gun.

Will aimed carefully and fired. The bullet went through Le Chiffre’s hand, leaving a neat hole that spurted blood. Jean cried out and pulled the wounded limb to his chest, pressing his back against the wall. Will pointed the gun at his heart next. “Stay there,” he warned. “I, uhm… I don’t want to kill you.”

Jean nodded, cradling his hand, his own blood smearing over his bare chest and stomach.

“Fuck,” Will muttered, pulling his now bloody shirt away from the slice over his ribs where he’d been grazed. He picked up the gun Jean was going for and put the safety on, sticking it in his waistband.

The yacht had come to a stop. Where the fuck were they? Will checked the number of bullets left in the clip and edged carefully out the glass door to the deck where they’d had the party, an open area with lounges, chairs, and a jacuzzi. There were two large white poles that supported the deck above. He crept around the closest one, gun at the ready. There were lights in the distance, but not those of Monte Carlo. This was a much smaller settlement.

The yacht was anchored behind a rock formation, keeping it hidden from shore, not that anyone could see anything in the dark anyway. Turning, he saw another, smaller vessel moored to the side of the *Andiamo* , no more than a speedboat, though an expensive one. It was deserted. Glancing up, he saw lights in the *Andiamo’s* helm room on the uppermost deck and the pilot and his assistant peeking fearfully through the windows. If they had any sense, they’d stay there.

Without warning, someone threw themselves over the railing onto the deck, landing spryly, and rushed him. Will turned and squeezed off two shots that found their targets in shoulder

and leg before the figure crashed into him at a full run. They hit the textured floor of the deck. Will abandoned the gun. It obviously wasn't bothering his assailant much. Probably because the man trying to kill him now wasn't a man at all, but a vampire.

He managed to roll away and get to his feet, but the UnDead was fast, though not particularly well-trained. He didn't seem to notice that Will was leading him away from the humans, toward the other side of the boat, where he could pick up a metal end table and smash him in the face with it. He got in two good hits before the vampire ripped the table from his hand and flung it away.

The monster's fierce eyes were pure obsidian fury and he snarled, showing off the wicked teeth of his maw. He lunged forward, but Will saw the move coming from miles away. He feinted to the side, then slid under the grasping arm. Taking the creature by the wrist and the back of the head, he slammed his face into the metal yacht railing half a dozen times before the UnDead was able to wiggle away.

Several shots rang out over the deck, pinging off of the railing. Two found their mark just as Will turned, burying into his shoulder and pectoral. He fell to one knee, hand clasped over his wounds. Valenka approached, a pistol in hand, clicking as she tried to shoot him again. *Why did I fucking forget about her?* he thought stupidly as blood poured over his hand. *Fuck* . At least she was a terrible shot and her clip was empty. But his right arm was useless. There were broken bones in his shoulder.

The unknown vampire was on his feet, face a mess of blood, but nothing if not more pissed off. He rushed Will with preternatural swiftness but again, his lack of experience betrayed him. Will dodged again and struck out with his left hook, cradling the injured arm against his side. It connected squarely with the UnDead's mouth, and Will felt the flesh of his hand slice open on the creature's teeth. As the vampire rocked back from the blow, Will took him by his black hair and rammed his face into his knee.

It stunned the bloodsucker momentarily, but Will couldn't go on like this. Blood poured from the gunshot wounds, soaking his shirt, sticking it to his skin. He was getting lightheaded. Tired. And he didn't have a weapon, something with enough stopping power to put this fucker out long enough for the sun to come up.

Here came Valenka, swinging a splintered pool cue. Ducking it and disarming her was easy enough, even with one arm, but he hesitated, flipping the cue around so the pointed end was towards him, not the furious blonde. For Jean, even though it was stupid, even though Will's cover was clearly blown and they were all trying to kill him. He rammed the blunt end of the cue into Valenka's forehead, and she dropped to the floor, unconscious but alive instead of skewered through the eye.

In his chaotic mind the golden strand of empathy swam, twisted like a gilded eel as he fought for his life. And then, he heard Hannibal's voice.

We make mercy. And we make murder, too. It matters only to us.

The mercy Will made in that moment cost him. The vampire came at him from behind the moment he switched ends of the cue and used it to subdue Valenka, and tackled him to the

ground. Will lost his grip on the weapon, but managed to flip on his back to try and defend himself.

But he was fighting with one arm against two, in a supine position, and it spelled disaster. Within seconds, Will was pinned under his adversary, who sat directly on his pelvis. The vampire grabbed his wrists and shoved them against the boat deck on either side of Will's head. Will roared in pain as the broken bones in his shoulder moved, anguish threading through every nerve, catching fire, leaving him dizzy and nauseated.

The first time the vampire leaned toward his neck, Will managed to drive his forehead into his chin to keep the fangs away. His attacker just head-butted him back, splitting his eyebrow open. Will twisted his face away involuntarily, exposing his neck, coiling whatever strength he had left to try and throw the other man off of him. Distantly, he heard Jean shouting for the creature to stop. Then, teeth in his throat, tearing the flesh. This was no delicate bleeding, no kiss of pleasure and pain. Within a breath, everything went black.

We live in a primitive time, don't we, Will? Neither savage nor wise.

***

He was floating in a grayscale place, underwater, maybe, by the way the lights played with the waves, sparkling, sparkling—

A freezing splash — Will felt water and melting ice cubes pelt his face. Their coolness was heaven on the split in his eyebrow and dimmed the nausea as well.

No, he didn't want to wake up, not when sleeping felt so good. Why should he push for the surface? *Because you're in deep shit, you fucking idiot* , his brain answered for him, this time in Nigel's voice. This knowledge was accompanied by consciousness, which was paired with dull, aching pain and stiffness from head to toe. His right arm and shoulder were completely numb.

Will opened his eyes and tried to move. No dice. He was tied to one of the massive support poles that held the second deck sunbathing area up from the main deck where the party had been. His legs were tied together, and then lashed to the pole behind him. Another rope went around his waist and twisted up to bind his hands. The knots were clever, and the rope was a durable marine blend. He couldn't feel his fingers. He wished he couldn't feel anything, especially the slowly-healing hole in the side of his neck where the goddamn vampire had taken his blood.

Speaking of the asshole in question, he stood before Will with an empty champagne bucket, which he'd just emptied over Will's head to wake him. Some time must have passed. The only lights on the ship were the strings of Christmas lights on the railings, and the engines were silent. The speedboat that had clearly brought this vampire and the now-missing (but no doubt gravely injured) human thugs was gone, as were Le Chiffre and Valenka. The ocean wind was soft, the waves quiet. They were alone.

“Will Graham. Never thought I’d have the pleasure. And let me tell you, *it was a pleasure* .” The vampire stepped forward and grabbed Will by the chin, holding his head steady so he could lick the blood from the side of Will’s face with his cold tongue. “You taste like absolute sunshine. I could get used to that.”

“Get the fuck off me.”

“Tough words for the guy who’s tied to a pole. Besides, you like it. I’ve heard the rumors about you and one of my kind. Some people say it’s Hannibal Lecter, assuming he’s more than a legend.” The UnDead pulled a lounge chair closer and made himself comfortable. “All the little broken humans are gone. It’s just you and me now. And we wait. We wait for my master. Won’t he be surprised.” He laughed, and used a bar towel to blot the blood away from his busted nose. It was already healing. The power of Will’s blood, no doubt.

“Did Le Chiffre get his hand to stop bleeding?”

“Oh, my heart. Of course. Though you should have seen his face when he saw you tied to this post, your neck all torn up like that. He doesn’t know what you are. Probably thinks you’re dead.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Mr. White called your alleged contact with the Yakuza. What you probably didn’t know is that they went to University together in London back in the day. And guess what? He’s never heard of you.”

“I’ve never heard of you, either. Whose bitch are you, anyway?”

The vampire laughed, leaned back, and slapped his knee as he crossed his legs. “Well, it’s nice to meet you too. Devon Sylvestri. And my maker? Mason Verger himself. Y’know, it’s his death-day next week, and you’ll make the perfect gift.”

Will felt a cold twist in his chest. “Shit,” he muttered.

“Oh shit is right.” The bloodsucker smoothed his black hair with a nasty grin. “Mr. Verger has a bone to pick with you.”

“Devon Sylvestri,” Will mused, a sardonic twist capturing his mouth. “The organ thief. Not sure, ah, how Mason got you out of prison. Whatever strings he had to pull, I’m not sure it was worth it. You were too stupid to get into medical school. Couldn’t even steal a-a fucking *kidney* right.”

“He *chose* me,” Sylvestri insisted defensively, his dark eyes narrowing.

“Because he wanted a loyal dog, not a bright one. And one he can, ah, literally look down on. *Être haut comme trois pommes. ”*

“Choose a fucking language and speak it.” Hobart went back behind the bar. “Excuse me a sec — looking for some toothpicks to shove under your fingernails. I wanna have a little fun before I call the boss.”

“Fingernails? Very original.” He would be a smartass to the end. And if Sylvestri called Mason Verger, brought him here, the end would probably be sooner rather than later. Mason would torture Will, too, make him give up Margot’s location and how to find her before draining Will dry andchopping chopping him into pieces for the fish to feast on.

Sylvestri didn’t find any toothpicks, but he did find the small paring knife Will had used to cut the lemon to make sazeracs earlier in the evening (or a thousand years ago, it felt like thr same passage of time). He approached coyly, taking his time, and curled one hand into Will’s hair, pinning his head to the pole behind him. He used the knife to cut away the Henley buttons of his ruined shirt one at a time before ripping it further open. “Would you look at that?” He traced the knife point along the scars on Will’s hip, under his rib cage, and ringing his collarbone. “You’ve been busy. Then again, I suppose I can’t prove that any of these were consensual. We are fighting a war, after all. Though, some of those places look downright *tender* . You’d have to let a vampire get pretty close…” He tapped the point of the knife at one of the fresher scars, one that Hannibal had made the night they’d met up at the casino. “Pretty sick. You’re a Daywalker. Don’t you hate us? What kind of Romeo and Juliet bullshit is going on with you?” He sighed. “Well, if you get off on it, I suppose that’s fine. Drinking from a Daywalker is a rare, rare treat. I’ll take what I can get.”

He dragged the knife over the scar until blood came. Will gritted his teeth. A small wound, yet somehow more painful than the bullets lodged in his shoulder that had long-since gone numb. Sylvestri opened his mouth and leaned down.

Bone-white fingers closed around Sylvestri’s throat and dragged him back. Someone with perfectly styled hair, wearing a gray sweater and dark pants pushed Sylvestri down to the deck of the ship on his belly. Sylvestri bucked, pushed back, but the man in black put a knee in his back and gripped his head between his hands. With a swift, sick twist, Sylvestri’s neck snapped. Kept twisting, until the head came entirely free in a fount of Will’s stolen blood that rocketed out of the ragged stump, splattering the deck.

Will’s savior climbed to his feet, pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his hands delicately, then smoothed a rogue hair back into place.

“Hannibal,” Will breathed in relief.

Hannibal, smiling gently, his maroon eyes glinting in the moonlight, stepped over the body and approached him. “My darling one,” he purred, reaching out to smooth Will’s tangled hair. “What have you gotten yourself into this time?”

“Just the usual.” He shifted uncomfortably in his bonds. “Aren’t you going to…”

“Just give me a moment, please.” Hannibal put his hands together as if in prayer and brought his fingers to his lips, eyes traveling Will’s prone body.

“What are you waiting for?” Will demanded.

“Forgive me, beloved, this is a moment for the memory palace.”

“What? Why?” Will barked.

“You look… utterly delectable trussed up like that.”

Will let out a short, shocked laugh. “Are you fucking serious?”

“Oh yes.” Hannibal lowered his hands to his sides and stepped closer. “Struggle a little for me. Please.”

Remarkably, despite the bullet wounds and everything else, he felt the flare of desire crawl over his body from groin to neck. Will worked his bonds as best he could, wiggling his wrists and twisting his torso one way and then the other, looking for leverage. Hannibal came closer, closer still. Will ceased his movement and looked at him, trying to read his expression. His breaths came short and fast.

Hannibal put his hands — heavenly cold — on Will’s shoulders, leaned forward, and licked the knife wound. “That’s my mark,” he complained, a slight pout to his blood-reddened lip. “He’s ruined it.”

“Then fix it,” Will whispered.

“Of course.” Hannibal kissed him, long, slow, then trailed his lips and tongue down Will’s neck until he reached the wound just below the collarbone, his favorite place. Will’s sharp inhalation at the bite dissolved into a sound of pleasure. He threw his head back against the pole, breathing heavily as a feverish flush crept over his exposed skin.

Hannibal pulled back after only a moment, dotting the blood on his chin. “Not too much,” he cautioned them both. “Or you’ll pass out again.”

“Are you going to untie me now?”

Hannibal ran his hands along the rope around his waist, then caressed his inner thigh instead. “Your manners leave something to be desired, as usual.”

“You are a fucking *supervillain* !” Will growled, then gasped when Hannibal reached between his legs and fondled his bulge.

“Ask. Nicely.”

“Please untie me.”

Hannibal tsked. “So uninspired. Just like our poor friend there.” He motioned over his shoulder at the headless body.

“Untie me.” Will arched a dark eyebrow. “I need you, Hannibal. *Please* .”

Hannibal ran a hand down the tender part of his neck and kissed him gently again. “Perfect.”

It took a good ten minutes for Hannibal to untie or cut through the ropes, starting with Will’s feet. When the last cord went, Will pitched forward, his legs refusing to hold him. Hannibal caught him easily and lowered him onto a chaise lounge, smearing the white canvas cushion with blood.

“Look at all those stars.” Will’s head felt thick, and his eyesight fuzzy. The parts of his body that were injured ached morrow-deep, but Hannibal’s touch and the night wind over the ocean were lovely and cool. “Beautiful, and, ah… cold. Like you.” He tried to look into Hannibal’s eyes, but his own wouldn’t focus.

“You once told me you didn’t have a romantic bone in your body.” Hannibal grabbed some clean towels from the rack near the jacuzzi tub, which still bubbled along like it was a normal night on the Riviera. “That was a lie.” He wrapped the gunshot wounds and applied pressure.

“And dead, some of those stars. We’re only seeing the light now.”

Hannibal chuckled lovingly, and the sound rolled through the night and over the waves. “Quit while you’re ahead, beloved.” He removed the sodden towels and switched them for fresh ones.

“How did you know I was here?” Will coughed, and leaned over to spit bloody foam over the side of the chaise lounge. “I mean, I knew you were still in Monaco, and you knew I was working Le Chiffre, but—”

“I was watching over you.” Hannibal checked the towels, and found that the bleeding had mostly stopped, then gently helped Will remove what was left of his shirt. Will grunted and gritted his teeth as his shoulder jostled slightly. “I’ll be back in a moment.” Hannibal tucked another towel behind Will’s head, and disappeared into the yacht.

Will closed his eyes and listened to the ocean until Hannibal reappeared with a first aid kit. He sat next to Will’s lounge on a chair and opened the metal box on his lap. “I saw you go inside with Valenka after the party. Not long after, she came outside and took a phone call. From what I could hear, she was talking to someone who’d done some checking up on your story about the Yakuza. She called someone else and gave the order to start the engines. That’s when I stowed away. Valenka brought the boat to this cove and *he* ,” Hannibal indicated the headless vampire lying on the deck, “showed up on a smaller boat with two other humans. I was hidden, but I couldn’t move without giving myself away. It took a great deal of concentration to cloak my presence from him mentally.”

Hannibal held up a hooked needle and threaded it. Will grabbed his wrist. “Whiskey,” he requested.

Hannibal went to the bar and came back with a large bottle of top shelf Irish. He unscrewed the cap and handed it to Will, who took a long, long drink.

“Thanks, darlin’.” He patted Hannibal’s cheek affectionately, and then took another drink. “Proceed.”

Hannibal examined the wounds. “You’re lucky.” He pointed to the bloody hole in his shoulder. “This one went all the way through.” Will sucked air in through his teeth as Hannibal stitched both sides shut, and delicately sewed a particularly shredded knuckle on his left hand. “Now for the grand finale.”

Will held up a finger. Hannibal waited until he drank whiskey again for several long moments. “All right. Do it.”

“I’ll be as gentle as I can,” Hannibal promised, pulling the long tweezers out of the medical kit.

“I know you will, Doctor.”

Hannibal leaned in and kissed him slowly, giving his lower lip the tiniest nip, not enough to break the skin. “There you go again with your romance. You should get shot to hell more often.”

“Be careful what you wish for.” Will leaned back and took a few deep breaths. “I’m ready.”

Hannibal parted his bloody pectoral wound and shoved the tweezers inside. Will breathed deeply through the pain as Hannibal pinched the slug and eased it out before reapplying pressure, then stitching the entry wound shut.

“How long can we stay here?” Will wondered aloud, after swallowing more whiskey. “Is Mason on his way? Oh, yeah, he knows about this whole, ah, *clusterfuck* , by the way.”

“I overheard.” Hannibal took Will’s shoes and socks off one at a time, and used the socks to sponge the blood off the shoes. Luckily they were black. “Sylvestri never called him to share the news that he’d captured you. How long until Le Chiffre comes back to get his vulgarly oversized boat?”

Will snorted laughter at the comment. “Morning, at the earliest. But you need to get somewhere safe before the sun comes up.”

“You must know how to pilot a boat this size.”

“Fuck, no. It’s practically a cruise ship. Besides, it’s gotta have satellite tracking.”

“When I was hidden below decks, I saw a Zodiac.”

“That I can manage.” Another mouthful of whiskey.

“We have a few hours. You should rest awhile.” Hannibal took a halfhearted swipe at the spatters of blood on his clothes. “Things will be easier on shore if we don’t look like we just came from a crime scene.” He plucked the whiskey bottle from Will’s bloodstained grasp. “You need your wits about you, beloved.”

“I’m fucking starving.” Dinner had been approximately ten thousand years ago.

“I’ll see what I can find. Wait here.” Hannibal brought him a soft white throw from one of the couches and tucked it over him. Leaning over, he kissed Will’s forehead. “Look at the stars.”

Will dozed in the wake of the whiskey and bodily trauma. Slowly, he could feel the bones knitting back together, though it would be days before he was right again. Blood loss didn’t help. After a time, Hannibal returned with a couple of the protein bars, a large bottle of water,

and a smaller bottle of orange juice. He gave Will strict instructions to finish it all while he prepared for their departure. Eating and drinking helped tremendously, and Will was able to stand on his own feet when Hannibal came to get him again.

Hannibal helped him limp down the carpeted hallway to the staterooms, turning left into Le Chiffre's. He could still smell Jean in here. "Did you see Le Chiffre leave?" he asked as Hannibal led him through the stateroom to the lavish bathroom done all in white and rose gold.

"He got on Sylvestri's boat with Valenka, the men you pummeled, and the rest of the crew. They left as soon as Sylvestri had you secured."

"I mean, how did he look?" Will sank into a chair near the massive oval whirlpool bathtub, which was full of hot water and some kind of bath oil that smelled like lavender.

Hannibal set Will's shoes on the floor by the door, and tossed the bloody socks in the wastebasket. "He knew you weren't who you claimed to be, but he seemed shaken, seeing you with your neck bitten open. And brokenhearted, I'd say. Had his hand wrapped up. I'm sure he'll recover well enough."

"Hmm." Will thought about the little boy and his mother painting a Christmas tree on the floor. Absently, he blinked out his colored contacts and set them on the edge of the sink.

"You felt something for him." It was a statement, not a question. Will detected the hint of something barbed buried in the undertones of Hannibal's voice.

"It's just the empathy," Will assured him, looking up at him again. "It's, ah… stronger, lately. Since that night you and I met at the casino I've been feeling… *more* . More of everything. After years of just… numb."

Hannibal smiled gently and tested the bath water with his hand. "Let me help you." He motioned for Will to stand and helped him undress and get in. "It's always a pleasure to see the true color of your eyes," he said as he slid Will's pants down to his ankles, sending a titillating thrill up Will's spine.

Will exhaled his relief as Hannibal lowered him down in the tub and put a towel behind his head. Hannibal left him, returning to the stateroom to look for clean clothes while Will dabbed his face with a washcloth. Getting all the blood off wasn't easy one handed. Thankfully, Hannibal returned after a time and took up the luxurious sea sponge next to the tub and gently ran it over Will's shoulders and chest. He lifted Will's chin and washed his throat, then one hand at a time, then brushed the blood from beneath his nails.

After helping him towel off, Hannibal sat him on Le Chiffre's bed and bandaged his stitched wounds with gauze. The subtle flare of his nostrils meant only one thing to Will. He could tell what Will and Jean had done in this very bed mere hours ago. Will winced, waiting for the other shoe to drop. But Hannibal only asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Better." Will paused. "What are you thinking about?"

Hannibal smiled faintly. “Two things. As you’ve probably ascertained, I’ve been shadowing you every night since we reconnected. That’s how I knew you’d be coming to the *Andiamo* again tonight. I had no business following you or getting on this boat tonight. I understand if you feel I didn’t respect your boundaries.” He kept his eyes on his work, securing Will’s wounds. “I don’t want to repeat mistakes.”

Will ran the fingers of his good hand through his wet hair. “You can’t violate boundaries if we never talked about what they were. And we haven’t. None of this was planned. I don’t know about you, but, ah… I have *no idea* what we’re doing. Obviously if you hadn’t followed me, I’d be dead, so I’m not exactly upset about it. But you’ve been… possessive before. And it’s ended… uhm, badly for…” he didn’t say Abigail’s name, but Hannibal must have been thinking about her, too.

They were quiet for a while, sitting next to each other on the bed. Finally, Will spoke. “What was the second thing?”

“What I’ve come to understand about loving you, Will, is that what we have is like nothing else. I can’t begrudge you what had to be done in the line of duty.”

“I could fuck everyone in Monte Carlo,” Will said, “and none of them would ever come close to making me feel the way you do. That’s why I’ve been numb for three years, Hannibal. Because if I can’t have you, or even the hope of you, then there’s no point… t-to any of it.”

Hannibal kissed him, gently at first, then harder, guiding him back down on the bed. Will grunted softly as his tender shoulder touched the duvet. Hannibal pulled back, ran his cool fingertips over Will’s brows, cheeks, his eyelids and finally his mouth, before kissing them again. Will felt all of his muscles relax, his pain a gentle ache now, as Hannibal’s lips went along his throat. He traced his fingers through Hannibal’s hair, ruining the style to marvel at its uncanny softness.

Hannibal glided both hands down Will’s chest from clavicle to navel, kneeling over his hips, then sat back just to take a long, uninterrupted look at him. Will saw his nostrils flare again, but the vampire slid off of him and the bed in a lithe movement, adjusting the collar of his sweater and brushing a hand through his hair.

Will felt heat creep out of the neckline of the plush robe. When Hannibal glanced at him, he sat up, leaning on his bent elbow, tracing the edge of his finger over his lower lip. He couldn’t bring himself to speak plainly – what he wanted was so ill-advised he surprised himself with being so utterly irresponsible. Playing with fire. Mason Verger and a private army could arrive at any minute, and here he was, doing anything in his power not to get out of bed.

“Did Le Chiffre leave you… unsatisfied?” Hannibal asked, voice low and smoky as he brushed casually at a splash of dried blood on the sleeve of his sweater.

Will felt a smile blossom over his mouth. He sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, letting the robe drop from his damaged shoulder, then his healthy one. “You could say that,” he agreed. “It’s not the same… when I’m not with you. You *know* that.”

Hannibal's eyes had a velvet sheen to them. When he spoke, his voice was as mild and mannerly as ever, though Will could sense the undertow of depraved need beneath the smooth, glassy surface. "Yes," he said. "And you know me very well, beloved. Tell me – what am I thinking?"

Will slid off the bed and stood in front of him. "You, ah… you knew what I was doing in here with Le Chiffre when you were hidden below deck. You brought me in here to clean up because you wanted to be sure." Will's tongue touched his bottom lip. "I bet you were just- just… *burning* with jealousy. Weren't you." Not a question. He didn't need the empathy pulse to know that. Will reached out and lifted Hannibal's cool hand, pressing it over the rounded rise of his chest, over his heart, hoping he'd feel the rhythm pick up.

"You're injured," Hannibal said.

Will's response was to fold Hannibal's hand down, slipping it over the expanse of his belly, then placing it over the cloth tie of the robe.

"You always were insatiable." Hannibal's eyes drifted away from Will's face and he teased the knot open. The robe slid off of Will's body, whispering to the floor, revealing the landscape of bruises and bites, bandages like bridges connecting different continents. Hannibal placed his palm on Will's chest again, eyes gleaming, rubies caught in museum-quality light, unearthly, predatory.

"I could tell he didn't leave you sated," Hannibal told him, thumb grazing his peaked nipple, playing with the areola while leaving the point untouched, Sleeping Beauty tempting fate with the spindle.

"Yet another reason it's, ah… a good thing you came along." Will's heart was loud in his ears, and his cock twitched, somehow finding enough blood to respond to the promise of what was surely to come.

A tiny bend of Hannibal's wrist, a shift in his weight, and Will was on his back on the bed, the impact sending a stab of pain through his shoulder. Hannibal hauled up Will's legs and knelt between them on the floor, licking the insides of his thighs, threatening them with the points of his fangs. Will trembled out a shaking breath, expecting a ravenous bite at any moment. But Hannibal only teased, bringing his mouth at last to Will's crotch. Will shifted back on the bed a bit and bent his legs, resting them on Hannibal's back, draped over his shoulders.

Hannibal looked at him, the bottom half of his face buried behind Will's balls. "Please," Will said, the word slipping between his lips like he'd lost hold of it. Hannibal's eyes glowed again, as if to say, *begging already? You know what that does to me.*

Hannibal swept his tongue over Will's puckered hole. Will clenched up for a second, but it was just a muscular reaction. Hannibal spread him wider with loving hands and pushed his serpentine tongue inside, savoring Will with a series of soft, adoring hums. Will moaned, his free hand drifting down to caress his belly scar, arching his back.

Hannibal was tireless, alternating his licks with flicks and penetration, punctuating it with languid strokes of Will's cock. It was Will who eventually sat up and grabbed him by the hair, pulling his face away. "Your tongue's, ah… really fucking talented," he said, voice strained, sweat re-wetting his damp hair. "But it's not enough."

Hannibal's mouth quirked up on one side. As Will drew his legs back, the vampire stood and curled his fingers under the hem of his sweater to slip it off. Will sat up and opened Hannibal's belt and zipper, freeing his cock, giving it a long lick and a kiss that elicited a ravenous, inhuman growl from his UnDead lover. Will wet the length of it entirely before taking Hannibal deep, easing open his throat to accommodate the familiar shaft he'd missed so much. He drew Hannibal forward by the hips, spreading own legs and wrapping them around Hannibal's calves where he stood by the bed, bracing himself, groping up the curve of Hannibal's back and cupping his ass. It was a clinging, hungry posture, telegraphing his need, and Hannibal's response was to grip him by the hair and the back of his neck to face fuck him, though at a controlled pace. Will worked his tongue as Hannibal thrust in and out, letting his teeth scrape lightly now and then, rewarded with Hannibal's body locking up one limb at a time. Will looked up at him through his lashes. Hannibal's response to this was to climax, bursting into Will's mouth and down his throat.

Will swallowed, savoring the familiar taste. Vampire cum just wasn't the same, and in a good way. Sweeter, lukewarm, less of it.

"Remarkable boy," Hannibal said breathlessly, stroking his hair as Will gently released his still-hard cock from between his tingling lips.

It didn't diminish in the moments after, and Will ran his fingertip along the underside. "It really got to you, didn't it?" he asked, tilting his head a few degrees to the right with a smirk. "If it makes you feel better, I didn't fuck him. And I didn't let him fuck me."

Hannibal eased him back onto the bed, coaxing him to stretch out with the pillows behind his head, comforting the strain on his injured shoulder. Hannibal crawled over him gently, kneeling across his waist. "What transpired, exactly?"

"You really wanna know?" Will twitched up an eyebrow as Hannibal reached over to rummage through Le Chiffre's bedside drawer. He pulled out a pistol and slid out the clip, popping out the slug in the chamber, then found what he was looking for – a nondescript brown bottle of lube with a modern, unadorned label that indicated its price and quality. Squeezing some onto his fingers, he slid them between Will's legs and anointed his hole. Will clenched instinctively again at the feeling of cool fingers and cold gel, which brought a glint of amusement to Hannibal's features.

"It's not a matter of wanting or not wanting," Hannibal told him, massaging his puckered entrance with his slicked digits. "I'm compelled to know."

"I sucked his cock," Will said.

"With as much enthusiasm as you demonstrated with mine?"

Will scoffed at the idea. "He was smaller than you, if that helps."

Apparently it did. Hannibal spread Will's thighs wide and slid into him. He shuddered through an adoring moan, holding Will by the backs of his knees, seeming to savor the sensation the way one might keep the taste of a rare delicacy on the tongue before swallowing. Another hard thrust and he was all the way in. Will grunted, relaxing himself to accommodate the intrusion. The sound of strain brought a wider smile to Hannibal's aristocratic features. He reached down and dug his fingers into the bandaged gouge on Will's side where the bullet had grazed him. Will sucked in a breath, arching against the bed. "Does it hurt?" Hannibal growled, showing again the preternatural, hellish light of his vampiric eyes, his voice a feral tangle.

"Yes," Will said, straining. "Price I'm willing… to pay… f-for… all of it…!"

Hannibal held his legs apart and began to thrust in earnest, ramming into him, again and again with his tireless strength. Will felt the possessiveness, the envy, the impotent anger of Will's infidelity with each movement, built up like a volcano over three years of longing, finding, at last, an outlet.

"Will…!"

"Don't stop," he ordered, even as the second word distorted in amorous agony.

Hannibal pulled out and turned him over roughly, making his injuries shriek. Before Will could push himself up on his knees, Hannibal had already slammed back into him. Will was consumed by Hannibal's point of view, hearing his thoughts as the pendulum squirmed and turned in his mind. The vampire's wounded pride and the ache of the long separation flooded him; Hannibal split him open wide as if intent on ruining him entirely. Will gripped the pillow under his head, holding on so tightly his knuckles went white.

Hannibal slowed down at last, bending over and embracing him in his silken granite grip. "Ask me to forgive you for what you did with him tonight."

Will chuckled breathlessly as Hannibal kissed his neck and ran his tongue along the sweat gathered on Will's spine. "No."

Hannibal wormed a hand between Will's chest and the mattress to find his nipple, twisting it in earnest this time. "All in the line of duty? Is that what Uncle Jack wants you to do? Subdue the vampire threat by sucking cock and spreading your legs? Has he taken you off assassin duty and assigned you to be Daylight Inc's Daywalker *slut* ?"

He squeezed Will's shoulder wound again, and Will's body went rigid, his breath fleeing his lungs. Hannibal moaned as Will's body tightened instinctively around his cock.

Will glanced over his shoulder, panting. "I learned from the best."

Hannibal's eyes went cold, the lustful play draining out of them. It made Will's heart plummet. But then he smiled, showing fangs, and slid out of Will, rolling onto his back next to him on the bed. "You have become much more sociable, certainly." He glanced at his erection and back at Will as if to say, *well? It isn't going to ride itself.*

Will got up with a stifled groan, lifting himself over Hannibal and pressing his cock against his spread hole. He sank down with the aid of gravity and Hannibal's hands guiding him, stroking his thighs. He didn't move for a minute, letting his body adjust as Hannibal fondled Will's cock where it lay heavily between them. He braced his hands on Hannibal's chest, fingers curling in his silky body hair, and began to move, fucking himself faster and faster. Hannibal let him set the pace for a few minutes, gazing up at him with an adoring expression, a saint in a painting on his knees before a vision of the Virgin. Then he took Will by the hips and held him in place, rolling up into him at what turned out to be the perfect angle. Of course it was. Hannibal never did anything halfway.

He pounded up into Will's prostate until he came, emptying gouts of white over Hannibal's stomach even as the muscles moved with thrusts that continued long after Will was suffering the ebb of pleasure and had crossed the border into overstimulation. Only then did he let himself finish.

Will collapsed into his arms, a trust fall. He knew he'd be caught and settled gently on the bed, tucked up against Hannibal, and he was, limp and spent, cum and lube slowly trickling out of him as the pain of his injuries throbbed along with his heart.

"So warm," Hannibal murmured against his forehead before pressing a kiss there. "I'd forgotten how warm…" He adjusted his arm gently, curling his hand around Will's ass, then pressing the flat pad of his middle finger just inside, feeling the wet mess still lingering there.

"I've killed people," Will said, a sudden confession prompted by the sense of post-coital intimacy and bittersweet clarity. "Humans. To get at Mason, sure. But… they weren't vampires."

"How did it make you feel?"

"Righteous," Will answered truthfully.

"Hmm." The finger in his ass was joined by another, teasing the stretched rim, seeking out the wet heat, easing the moisture back inside. "The same feeling as when you dispatch the UnDead, I imagine."

"It felt *exactly* the same." Will's voice was practically inaudible to his own ears, though he was sure Hannibal's sensitive senses picked it up.

"I thought it might." Then, "How many have you seduced for the good of Daylight?"

"This was the first time. But… it could happen again. It depends… what needs to, ah… to be done."

"Then I suppose I'll have to accompany you and ensure that after the mission's accomplished you don't spend the rest of the night pent up and unsatisfied."

Will smiled with a soft sigh through his nose. "Guess so." Then, "Speaking of the mission, I'm assuming Le Chiffre took all his evidence with him?"

“No computer, hard drive, or little black book,” Hannibal said apologetically.

“Shit,” Will cursed, twirling a few strands of Hannibal’s chest hair between his fingers before combing them out. “Well, at least the night wasn’t a *total* loss.”

“It will be,” Hannibal said ruefully as he sat up and guided Will to do the same, “if we don’t abandon ship.”

Hannibal helped him clean off and get into some of Le Chiffre’s clothes, and wore others himself. As he brought Will to the waiting Zodiac on the lower deck, he asked, “Do you have any plans tomorrow night?”

Will laughed up at the smattering of stars scattered through the midnight firmament. “I could use a vacation.”

“I’ll take you away from here,” Hannibal promised. “You should disappear for a time to get Mason off your scent, in any case. I’ll arrange the whole thing. It’ll be a surprise.”

“Perfect.”

As they flew over the darkened waves, just above the roar of the motor, Will found himself singing again for the second time in so many days after three years of a caged voice.

“Now our luck may have died and our love may be cold

But with you forever I'll stay

We'll be goin' out where the sand turn to gold

But put your stockings on 'cause it might get cold

Oh, everything dies, baby, that's a fact

But maybe everything that dies someday comes back…”

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Will and Hannibal lay low in a cabin in Colorado, but get an unexpected visit from Alana and Margot.

Christmas Eve, Colorado, 2021

Will slowed the Tahoe he'd rented to a stop and squinted through the swirling snow. There was a chain stretched across the road between two thick pines with a sign attached. The wind blew fiercely, whipping the sheet of metal around so quickly that he couldn't read it, though he suspected its message and let out a curse.

A man was standing at the last driveway before the road closure, dressed in head-to-toe Carhartt, his flashlight fighting the impending gloom. He tramped through the snow to Will's window and tapped on the glass.

"Yeah, that road's closed. State troopers," the man yelled over the blustery wind. "You gotta turn around."

Will looked at the map on his phone. "Is that Constellation Road?" he shouted back, pointing at the next right turn, close enough to see but tantalizingly out of reach by car. The man indicated yes, his grizzled face scrunched up against the wind.

"Can I, ah… leave my car in your driveway?"

"What?"

Will leaned to the side to get to his wallet and flipped out some money. "My *car* . I want to leave it in your driveway." He pointed to the little lane for emphasis.

"I-I guess." The man got out of the way as Will carefully put the SUV in reverse and turned into the man's half-plowed lane. He pulled forward and to the side so access to the little house wasn't blocked. Will got out and zipped up his coat, pulling his ushanka hat down further. Shouldering a small duffel bag, he walked back to the man, who had picked up a snow shovel. "Thanks," he shouted over the wind, handing him the wad of twenties.

"What are you doing? You're walking?" the old man shouted after him. "That's nuts!"

"Spent six months in Siberia. I'll be fine."

“It’s not worth it, buddy.”

Will turned back. “Yes, it is.” He smiled through the driving snow at the stranger, then set out up the snow-choked road, climbing over the chain.

It took close to an hour to hike to the cabin on the hillside. It was bigger than he’d expected, but a welcome sight to be sure, interior lights and Christmas bulbs alike throwing their rays out into the darkened woods. There was a sedan in the driveway plastered with ice, and the only sound was the wind in the trees and his even breathing as he waded through knee-deep snow. Fucking snow. He’d had enough of it for this lifetime.

Will waded through the snow to the porch and carefully climbed the icy steps. No movement inside, but that didn’t mean anything. Unsure what to do, he balled his gloved hand and knocked on the door. Will waited what felt like a full minute before the door opened. There was Hannibal, wearing an evergreen blazer over a thin black mock turtleneck, and charcoal pants tantalizingly tailored in places and casual in others in a way Will couldn’t explain. Hannibal’s eyes seemed to glow red for a moment, candlelight through ruby stained glass. “ Will . You didn’t have to knock. All my doors are open for you.”

Will smiled, feeling a nourishing warmth despite the wind that pelted ice crystals against his face. Hannibal reached for him, winding one end of Will’s scarf around his fist and drawing him inside with a subtle smirk.

As Hannibal shut the door against the elements, Will set down his bag and kicked off his boots. Hannibal edged closer and unwound the scarf from Will’s neck, then took his snowy coat to hang on a nearby hook. Then he slipped the ushanka from Will’s head and smoothed his chestnut curls. Will leaned into his hand with a little sigh that tasted like relief.

“Like Hansel from the old stories, you’ve come to my gingerbread house.” Hannibal said, tracing a hand down his stubbled cheek. His cool touch was no relief from the cold that was, no doubt, clinging to Will’s cheeks in the form of a chill blush.

“Gonna fatten me up and eat me?”

“Oh, yes.”

Will laughed, stepping carefully over the piles of melting snow he’d brought with him into the cabin, if you could call it that. The place was huge, the main room soaring overhead, supported by exposed, rough-hewn beams. Massive windows made up one wall, except for the fireplace and chimney, which were fashioned of large multi-colored stones. A crackling fire threw ambient light into the softly-lit room, aided by the colorful glow of a Christmas tree. It was like a greeting card, down to the white fur rug on the floor between the arms of a massive brown leather sectional that faced the fireplace.

There were two halls that branched off the main room, one leading to a brightly lit cottage-style kitchen, the other lined with bedroom doors. Will inhaled the mouthwatering scent of food.

“If you’ll excuse me – the dinner.” Hannibal moved with such naked preternatural swiftness for the kitchen that Will nearly lost sight of him.

Will rolled up the sleeves of his gray and black flannel and padded into the kitchen where Hannibal stood at the stove, now wearing an apron. Will recognized it – it was black with white writing that read “Mr. Good Lookin’ Is Cookin’.” He’d given it to Hannibal as a joke something like… six years back? Fuck. It felt like yesterday and a million years ago.

He bent and peered into the oven where some kind of meat sweltered. “What are we having?”

“Never ask what’s for dinner. Spoils the surprise.” Hannibal carefully measured herbs and sprinkled them in the pan. He couldn’t eat food, of course, but had, he’d always said, discovered a passion for cooking for Will.

And for Nigel. Will’s heart pressed in on his ribs at the thought.

“I didn’t hear your car.”

“They closed the road. I ditched it and walked the rest of the way.” Will leaned a shoulder on the doorframe and watched with a soft smile as Hannibal examined the edge of a cooking knife he’d brought with him, ignoring the set provided by the cabin’s kitchen. “I already had the winter gear from Siberia. Hence the, ah… furry hat.”

“It suits you. Rabbit?”

“Yeah."

Hannibal handed him the knife, handle first, his pale fingers gripping the blade with practiced elegance. “The onion?”

Will took the knife and stood in front of the cutting board while Hannibal stirred whatever was in the pan. He peeled away some of the papery skin, setting it aside carefully by habit, and dicing the onion the way his granny had taught him. Hannibal took the cutting board and emptied the chunks into the pan, stirring again. “The fireplace is gas-powered, I’m afraid. No burning the skins.”

Will came up behind him as he poured wine into the pan and scraped up the browned bits of onion and herb. “You were thinking about him, too, huh?” Nigel had always insisted on burning any onion skins they used during their cooking adventures. Nigel’s mother, long ago in his Romanian childhood, had taught him to do so, a folk magic custom meant to bring luck and prosperity into the home.

Hannibal gave the slightest nod, eyes on his work. “How is Nigel?” he asked, smoothly conversational, though Will could detect all kinds of emotions lurking under the water like squirming eels – pain, longing, regret, searing jealousy, tenderness.

“Other than alive, I wouldn’t know.” Will took the cutting board from the countertop and put it in the sink, washing it gently. They listened to the whisper of the water until he set it in the

drying rack. “He asked Jack to be reassigned to the new West Coast facility as part of Prurnell’s team.”

“I see.” If Will didn’t know Hannibal so well, he would have missed the tiny glint of victory that sparkled in his eyes.

Together, they finished the potato dish, with Hannibal patiently instructing. At last, it was all in the oven, with the timer set.

As Will turned to walk back towards the living room, asking about wine and whiskey, Hannibal caught him and lifted him easily up to sit on the marble countertop. He swiped a minute splash of cream sauce from Will’s forearm, the skin exposed where he’d rolled up his flannel sleeves. Then, “It’s a pleasure to cook for you again.”

Will smiled at him, and stroked Hannibal’s perfect hair, plotting how he was going to ruin it later. He took Hannibal’s face in his hands and descended on his cool, velvety lips for a long time as Hannibal’s hands stroked up and down his thighs, around his hips and backside, tasting him thoroughly but with a sensual gentility.

At last, Hannibal pulled away and traced his fingertips from behind Will’s ear to the hollow of his throat. “I have to feed you well. You’re about to be snowed in with me for a week. You’ll need your strength.”

Desire rippled through him, but by the time he could think straight, Hannibal had released him and turned away, headed for the living room. Will followed. A cart sat to the side with various liquors, crystal glasses, and an ice bucket. Hannibal put ice into a martini shaker and beckoned Will closer.

“When was the last time you made a martini?” Will asked, a playful lilt to his voice. “I didn’t think they had martinis 400 years ago.”

Hannibal smiled, the jingle of the ice cubes tinkling faintly in accompaniment. “No, not that long. I invested in some nightclubs in the sixties and found an interest in mixology, as I believe it is referred to now.” He handed Will the chilled glass and motioned to a pile of pillows and cushions on the furry white rug that were arranged in a nest before the fireplace.

They settled in to watch the snow swirling outside, warmed by the gas-powered hearth. Will sipped his drink. “This is perfect. But, ah… I didn’t expect anything less, coming from you.”

“It’s the best Russian vodka I could get. You said it was the most enjoyable art of your recent deployment.”

“Food wasn’t, that’s for sure.”

Hannibal chuckled softly. “I’m sure it was the ingredients or the cooks – under the right circumstances, Russian cuisine can be a delight, or so I’ve been told. Even so, after six months, I thought you might be ready for a change.”

“Good call. If I ever see cabbage or beets again, I might not survive it.”

Hannibal got up for a moment to turn on music, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* , then rejoined him by the fire. Will felt suddenly shy, undeserving of Hannibal's attention, of being pampered like this. He wanted to fill the silence, as easy as it was. "Can I, ah… ask you some questions about your past? Th-the… long ago stuff."

Hannibal seemed surprised, his hooded maroon eyes giving one slow blink. He didn't respond immediately.

"You can say no. I won't be… offended."

"Please ask. By all means."

Will cleared his throat and sipped his drink. "I never really asked you anything about yourself when we were together. I realize now how selfish that was. So I — well, you keep dropping these little hints, details about things. '60's nightclubs and noble birth, that kind of stuff."

Hannibal moved closer to him on the cushions until their shoulders touched. "Ask away."

"Start at the beginning, I guess. Who were you when… you were alive?"

Hannibal gazed into the fire, arm resting on one bent knee. "I'm vague on those details. It's been so long. But I'd be happy to tell you what I do recall."

Will nodded, eager for him to begin, but Hannibal deflected. "Would you care for another drink?" Will had put his empty glass on a side table.

"No, no, I'm fine. Go ahead."

Hannibal nodded, but did not speak. He went very still, eyes distant, turned towards the fire but unfocused on the flames. Will was just about to prompt him when he began to talk. "I was the eighth Hannibal Lecter born to my family line. My father was a count, a landed nobleman. Our ancestral home was in central Lithuania, near Kaunas. My mother was Italian, from the Sforza family in Milan."

"Stop. You're messing with me, aren't you? You're half Italian?"

"Yes," Hannibal insisted. "Why does it surprise you?"

"You have *never once* made me pasta," Will accused through a crooked smile as he got up to refill his martini glass from the shaker.

Hannibal made a sound that was the closest thing a fine gentleman could make to a snort. "No. My mother didn't cook, and when she married my father, she was expected to adapt to the Lithuanian way of life." He reached over and took Will's hand in his cold fingers. "It was a happy upbringing, until it wasn't."

"I'm sorry," Will said softly.

"It doesn't seem so long ago to me. But times were different, then. Brutality hovering always at the edge of reasoned civilization – wolves at the door."

Will took in a breath to speak, and the kitchen timer went off. “More later, beloved.” Hannibal got to his feet in one smooth motion, reaching down to clasp Will’s hand and help him stand. “A story for another time. Let’s feed you.”

Hannibal sat him at the long barnwood table in the kitchen, and served him roasted lamb, potatoes, and excellent wine. Then he settled at the other end of the table with an empty plate and a glass of wine in front of him. A lit candle burned in a holly centerpiece, the flame dancing over the jagged, satiny leaves.

Hannibal watched him carefully as he took the first few bites. “How is it?”

“It’s excellent. As always.”

“Tell me what you’re tasting. And how it pairs with the wine.”

Will took another bite. “The lamb is smoky, really tender. I love the fresh rosemary.”

“Rosemary I remember,” Hannibal said, swirling his wine and raising it to his lips for a tiny sip. “Many other memories of taste have fled, but I cherish a few within the walls of the memory palace.”

“It’s delicious. I missed your cooking. And cooking with you . ”

Hannibal smiled, almost shyly. After Will had finished eating, they cleared the kitchen and went back to the plush white rug and the cushions. Hannibal brought him a whiskey to enjoy while he continued to nurse his glass of wine; too much would upset the balance of a preternatural body meant for the consumption of blood in the unholiest of communions. The snow storm still raged outside, and the cabin’s frame groaned in the wind every so often, or exuded soft sighs over the music. Will sipped the whiskey appreciatively while Hannibal paused to hang up his jacket. He then folded himself close under Will’s other arm, resting his head against his collarbone and neck. Will absently brushed his ash-gray hair behind his ear with the pad of his finger.

“I hate to talk shop,” Hannibal said after a long, cozy silence. “Any news? Fallout from our boating adventure?”

Will snorted a silent chuckle, then turned serious. “Cover’s blown, obviously. Mason’s in the wind. Who knows when we’ll, ah… catch the scent again.”

“The stench, you mean?”

Will grinned at that before sobering. “Jack’s ready to kill me himself. That was almost a year’s worth of… *carefully* collected intel, and I, ah… fucked up. I overplayed my hand.”

“But, you rid the world of a bloodsucker who also happened to be unspeakably rude,” Hannibal reminded him as Will drained his drink.

“ *You* did, sugar. If you hadn’t been there, Sylvestri would’ve delivered me to Mason, and I’d either be dead or locked in a cell somewhere so he can suck my blood whenever he wants.” Will shuddered, thinking of his time in captivity in the Verger mansion on Muskrat Farm.

Then again, the way it ended hadn't been so bad. Nice to have both Nigel and Hannibal come to save him.

"I like to be useful to you." Hannibal put his arm behind Will's back and snaked his hand around his hip, then put the other on his chest, where he could no doubt feel Will's heart beating. "And Le Chiffre?"

"He and Valenka flew out of Paris less than 24 hours after you, ah… *swooped in* and saved me. Landed in Cairo, which leads me to believe they're headed for their compound outside of Damietta. Sort of their home base." He drained another glass. "Dunno how the hell we're gonna get that data now, but every vampire working with him's gonna jump ship. Too close of a call, I'd say. Hell, Mason might have him killed."

"Hmm."

Will put his glass down on the low table, and kissed Hannibal's forehead, then his mouth. "Let's not talk about work. This whiskey is incredible."

Hannibal got to his feet gracefully and retrieved the bottle so Will could look at it. "It's Japanese, similar to what you were drinking in Monaco. The young man who sold it to me was adamant that you'd be impressed. Did you know circus ringmaster mustaches are back in vogue?"

"Hipsters, I think."

"Angel-headed hipsters?" Hannibal traced his finger along the hem of the snug black tee-shirt Will wore under his flannel.

"I don't fucking know anymore. I try to keep up with things. It's harder when you aren't around people much. And you know I've never been, ah… what you'd call sociable." Will switched topics abruptly, feeling he was wading into darker waters. "What's that? The box by the tree."

Hannibal got up in another fluid, catlike motion and padded over to a cardboard box next to the Christmas tree, steps silent on the floorboards. "I asked the woman who rented me this place to leave some of the ornaments for us to put up. I thought we could trim the tree in the spirit of the season."

It was a very… couple-y thing to do, so Will evaded. "Did you celebrate Christmas growing up? Christmas trees were a German thing, though, right?"

The empathy pulse rustled, showing him a brief burst of images of Le Chiffre and his mother painting the Christmas tree beneath his bed, a secret tribute hidden from the communists. Will brushed them aside like crumbs from a table.

Hannibal chuckled softly, pulling a long strand of metallic garland from the box, its gold and silver strands dancing in his luminous eyes, glinting crimson. "No trees. I remember that the peasants were not permitted to work for the twelve days of Christmas. Some people fasted all through Advent. Certainly nothing as merry as this." He touched the Douglas fir's soft

needles. “I seem to recall it was Queen Victoria who inspired her subjects to domesticate Christmas. To cut down a tree and bring it inside your home, and put real candles on it, no less.”

“Plastic tree at Granny G’s,” Will said, his mind suddenly distant as Hannibal returned to his side, still playing with the length of garland. “When we lived in Michigan, my dad drove out into the country with his buddy and cut down somebody’s little pine tree. We had to keep it upright with a bucket filled with sand.”

“The Graham men are resourceful.” Hannibal swung a knee over and sat on Will’s outstretched legs. “Tell me more about young Will.”

“I’m the one who should be asking *you* .”

“Your memories are much fresher, beloved.”

Will half-smiled, the other edge of his mouth clinging to the bittersweet taste of nostalgia and memory mixed together. “We were poor. I followed my father from the boatyards of… Biloxi and Greenville, to lake boats on Erie.”

Will trailed off as Hannibal took his hands. “Always the new boy. Always the stranger,” Hannibal mused, picking up the strand of garland.

“Always. After a while, you stop trying to make friends. Hard enough without realizing the- the effort isn't worth it ‘cause you’ll just be leaving them, too…” Will trailed off with a sardonic smile. Hannibal had coiled up the tinsel and taken Will’s hands, placing them together with his wrists touching. He slowly looped the tinsel around them as a kind of garish bondage.

“Look at this.” Hannibal put his lips to Will’s knuckles for a minute, holding the looped tinsel tightly to draw them closer together. “You’ve gotten yourself in trouble again. What was it that you said on the boat? ‘Just the usual?’”

Will laughed under his breath and pretended to try and escape, holding Hannibal in his blue-golden gaze, the fire backlighting the vampire into a gorgeously predatory shadow. “You caught me again. How does this keep happening?”

“I don’t think it’s an accident. You put yourself in these positions to deliberately entice me.” Hannibal leaned forward, still holding his wrists together in his marble-hard hands, and kissed him tenderly. “I never could resist you. I saw you in the old theater those years ago, filthy from labor, and my situation was hopeless. I had to have you.”

Will pulled his wrists free, still wrapped in the garland, and slipped his arms over Hannibal’s head and shoulders, resting them against his back. Then, in a swift movement, he reversed their positions, planting a knee on either side of Hannibal’s hips.

He sat up and freed his hands, coiling the glittery strand around his fingers, a close-lipped smirk playing on his face. Hannibal let Will wind the cheap decoration gently around his neck and then pull it just the tiniest bit too tight. “I think it’s you that could use a little

discipline," Will whispered with a half-smile, giving the garland a little tug before he buried his mouth against Hannibal's, fangs be damned, he didn't care. He heard Hannibal's breath quicken when his feral canines grazed Will's bottom lip on the inside, just the tiniest nick, just the most delicate taste. Then, surprisingly, the vampire pulled back, folding his cold palm against Will's neck, thumb grazing the stubble at his jawline.

"My love, I'll play any game you want. Or no game at all. In the spirit of ending games…"

Will knitted his brows, and sat back so Hannibal could unwind the garland from his throat. It left a couple of stray slivers of shiny plastic on his sweater that Will brushed away. His heart felt folded in on itself as he waited for Hannibal to speak, dreading what might come.

"You've often remarked on my reluctance to speak plainly. In the spirit of renewal, let me ensure what I say cannot be misinterpreted. I'm here for *you* , Will. Not your Daywalker's blood. Not your connection to Daylight or the things you let me do to you." For a moment, almost shyly, Hannibal lowered his luminous ruby eyes. "I didn't always feel this way. When we were together years ago, I looked at you like a prize to be won, taken for myself. I saw you as an advantage and a chess piece." He paused again. Will was overcome, throat tightening, as he again was the one to break eye contact. "I wanted you to *belong* to me."

Will swallowed, now avoiding Hannibal's gaze. "I remember."

"I took what I wanted. What you willingly gave. But that wasn't enough. I felt betrayed, more deeply each time you refused my gift." His eyes watered. Will repressed the urge to take him in his arms immediately .

"Abigail." The name seemed to cause the imperious mouth physical pain. Softly now. "I wish I hadn't." A tear escaped the corner of his eye, following the inner line, the contour of his nose, the shape of which Will had studied at length and always loved. "I want you to know that we can sit here, watch this fire, the snow, and not have our great dissension hanging over us" He paused. "I won't ask you again or force my immortality on you."

Will reached out and took Hannibal's icy hands in his, laden with forgiveness and the ache of old wounds. He looked down at their fingers entwined together instead of at Hannibal's face, though he could feel those eyes searching his expression desperately. "I — I *want* to bring you to life. A little bit at a time. And… w-with Abigail…" he trailed off, struggling for words, "... I know you loved her, and…"

"Will." His name a soft caress.

He let go of Hannibal's hands to slip off his flannel shirt, and pulled the neck of the black tee-shirt away from his throat. "Take it. Maybe I can't give you what you want most, but I can… give you a little of what you need."

Hannibal reached for him, and drew him into a crushing embrace, holding him so tightly that Will couldn't breathe. He could feel his heart beating against Hannibal's silent chest and closed his eyes as Hannibal nuzzled his cheek against the side of Will's face. He spent a long moment in this perfect darkness, listening to the music and the whistle of the wind in the chimney, his own heartbeat in his ears.

Hannibal eased up, and twined his fingers in the curls on the back of Will's head, angling his face upward for a kiss. Forgiveness was too great and difficult for one person. It required two. Such a profound conscious and unconscious state of affairs, working behind the scenes of a theater production or an underground river finding its way through the earth. Will could feel it moving between them, its current. When they separated at last, their breaths, quick and shallow, were in harmony.

Will stood and held out a hand. Hannibal smiled, demure, and let Will use his Daywalker strength to lift him, crossing his long legs behind and wrapping his arms around Will's neck, his smile a loving, amused curve on one side of his lips. Will carried him down the hall to the master bedroom, lit only by another white and gold faux Christmas tree.

Will set Hannibal down gently on the large bed and climbed on next to him. He pulled the black sweater over Hannibal's head and tossed it on the side table. In doing so, he noticed that the thick faux-antique bed frame had leather buckle restraints at all four corners. He sat back on his heels and laughed, rubbing a hand across his face. "Always so, ah… prepared, aren't you?"

"Merry Christmas, Will."

"Are these for me, or for you?" Will teased as he pulled off his shirt and slid off the edge of the mattress to unzip his jeans.

"I suppose it's similar to receiving lingerie for Christmas." Hannibal watched him strip, sliding back on the bed to sit against the headboard, eyes glimmering as he took in the show. When Will climbed onto his hips, he made a move as if to reverse their positions.

But Will evaded and took him by the wrists. "I told you, it's your turn. You said you'd play any game I wanted."

"A promise I'll gladly keep." Hannibal lay back on the pillows and let Will buckle the restraints. "Tighter, beloved," he suggested, and Will obliged before pulling off the rest of his clothes securing his feet as well. The soft, celebratory light of the Christmas tree made Hannibal's pale skin golden, glimmering on the curls of his body hair.

Naked as the day he was born, Will smirked at Hannibal and turned slowly, taking his time to cross the room and disappear into the hall. He came back with another glass of wine and a pack of cigarettes, and dragged a cushioned chair over to the bedside. Settling in, he took a long sip, stroking his cock lazily with the other hand. "Been awhile since I got to see you squirm. Ages."

"Come to me, Will." Hannibal's voice was mild and polite, but it was an order, not a request. "You're too beautiful in this light."

"Be patient, darlin' . " Will lit a cigarette, using a nearby cutesy Christmas candy dish as an ashtray. "I'm enjoying this."

"Villainous," Hannibal said, giving his restraints a test pull.

Will grunted through an objectifying leer, giving himself another stroke. “Came all the way up here, rented this place, played Betty Crocker, and now you don’t get to touch me…”

The degradation seemed to speak directly to Hannibal’s cock, which twitched and filled to the point of strain the longer Will tortured him with amorous denial.

“If you aren’t careful, you’ll find yourself on the proverbial naughty list,” Hannibal quipped.

“With you? ‘Cause nothing about you is nice.” Will ground out the cigarette, and picked up the now-empty wine glass. He pressed his fingers into the side until it cracked, and removed a two-inch shard of glass. Hannibal watched him silently as he climbed back onto the bed at last, sitting on Hannibal’s solid hips, brushing their cocks together for one tantalizing moment before denying again.

Will raised the shard of glass to his hand and dragged it across his palm. He cupped his hand and let the blood well up before the wound began to close. Then he turned his hand over and let it slowly drip down his fingers onto the curve of Hannibal’s clavicle. “Is this what you want?” he said, softly teasing.

Hannibal’s eyes were fierce, hungry. “Yes.”

Will put a bloody finger to Hunter’s lips and let him suck it for a brief moment before taking it away again.

“More.” Hannibal strained against the black leather restraints. Wood groaned and the bedframe popped somewhere.

Will cut his palm again, and acted as if he would bring the wound to Hannibal’s mouth, but evaded at the last minute, smearing the blood along his perfect cheekbone and then down his neck, leaving a dark maroon trail. Hannibal tensed under him, opening his mouth and twitching his upper lip to bare his fangs in a feral snarl. The bedframe creaked again miserably. Will put his uninjured hand around Hannibal’s throat, and then lifted the bloody one so that the redness dripped into the open mouth. Hannibal’s sound was a moan braided with a demonic growl, and he pushed up against Will’s hand despite the force against his windpipe, straining against his bonds as the ruby drops hit his lips and tongue.

“More,” came the hoarse whisper as Will’s skin stitched itself closed. “Bring me your neck, beloved.”

Will traced his finger down Hannibal’s chest, then sketched a crude representation of his own belly scar along Hannibal’s stomach. “Not yet.”

Fierce crimson fire crackled through Hannibal’s eyes, and Will was thrown off guard, how inhuman he looked, white and straining against the leather straps. “Will. Now.”

Will straightened at the waist, cocking his head to the side. Was this a game anymore? Should he—

With an ear-splitting crack, the straps holding the restraints to the bed snapped. Will braced himself for the impact, but the millisecond of preparation didn't help him. In the blink of an eye, he was on his back with Hannibal pinning him down. He pushed against Hannibal's hands, which circled his wrists like steel, trapping them over his head.

Hannibal's eyes were still fiercely ravenous, his monstrousness rending the seams of the person-suit, and bursting through the inner layer – the cultured gentleman vampire. This was the beast, and Will had conjured him on purpose, he realized now.

Will tried to shift his torso, to pull his wrists free, and gave up. "Time to take what's yours?" He turned his head, exposing his throat.

Hannibal bit down with such force that he couldn't draw breath to cry out. Within moments he was drained, darkness feathering the corners of his vision, the Christmas lights haloed with the encroaching shadows.

Hannibal didn't need to hold him down anymore – Will's muscles no longer cooperated with the signals from his brain. His movements were languid, weak, and he could only smile faintly as Hannibal, sated in one way at least, licked his neck with firm, loving strokes of his tongue, hot now with Will's blood, as the wounds healed.

Hannibal draped his body over Will's, holding him close for a long moment before edging up on his elbow to look down at him. Even with his face covered in blood, his mild, gentlemanly expression had returned.

"You broke my Christmas gifts," Will said breathily through a facetious pout as Hannibal stroked his hair.

"I brought several sets."

"Of course… you did."

Will let Hannibal reposition him on the bed. Let – as if he had any say in the matter. Face down, head turned to the side, arms curled around the pillow. Hannibal got off the bed briefly to rummage through his bag, returning with a bottle of some kind of expensive-smelling oil. He slicked up his hands and knelt over Will, a leg on either side of his hips, gliding his hands along the contours of Will's back and up along his neck.

"Oh shit," Will murmured into the pillow, a hedonistic sigh. "I missed this." Hannibal's back massages were miraculous. Massage chairs or even human therapists couldn't push hard enough for a Daywalker to get any relief.

Hannibal was tireless, working through all the knots and stiff places, taking care with his rotator cuff, even if Beverly's serum negated the long-ago stab wound he'd gotten in the line of duty in New Orleans. He paused to bring Will a glass of water, turning him over on his back to massage his pecs, finding the sore spots at the corners of his clavicles and along his ribcage.

“You’re recovering nicely,” Hannibal purred as he slid down between Will’s legs, oiling his hand again. Will’s body was working hard, apparently, to replenish the blood, and had enough to spare to get him hard again. Hannibal stroked him into further firmness, then bent Will’s legs for him and shifted his hips up, slipping a decorative throw pillow embroidered with snowmen under his hips to get a better angle at his ass.

Will arched his back, letting out a sound that mixed satisfaction with yearning as Hannibal pressed his mouth against Will’s hole, devouring it with practiced licks and flicks, alternating between little pokes of the tip of his tongue against the center and swirls around the edge, then powerful swipes that disappeared all too quickly. All this while he stroked Will’s cock intermittently with his oiled hand.

“That stuff work for lube, too?”

The answer to his question was Hannibal’s finger sliding into his ass. Will tensed up, but then relaxed instinctively. Muscle memory, even after the passage of time.

Hannibal watched him intently, gauging Will’s reactions as he found the rise of his prostate with a doctor’s precision. Hannibal seemed to remember his body, too, and applied his movements just so, playing Will’s body like he might a delicate instrument. Will gripped the pillow behind his head, his other hand finding his hard nipple and trapping it between his first and second finger. Milky wetness wept from his cock, mixing with the lube when Hannibal stroked him again.

“Yeah, yes – right there–!” As if Hannibal didn’t know exactly what he was doing. Will’s directions were more a form of begging, especially when, “Please!” came from his mouth unbidden.

Then it came, the full-bodied orgasm that flooded him head to toe, saturating every nerve. It left him almost as drained and pliable as the blood loss, which was still in the process of recovering from. He was still coming down when Hannibal pressed the head of his cock against his oiled hole, slipping it past the rings of muscle and deep inside, bottoming out with ease. He pulled the pillow out from under Will’s hips and lay over him, turning them on their sides, lifting Will’s top leg and curling it around himself. Will squirmed in as close as he could and held him tight, gasping softly as Hannibal adjusted Will’s bent leg and began to thrust.

Will buried his face between the side of Hannibal’s neck and the pillow, nuzzling close, breathing in the familiar scent he’d missed so much. The feeling of this cold, perfect body, of being embraced by something otherworldly that could crush him easily but now made love to him tenderly, a creature so powerful needing him for sustenance of every kind. To sate every hunger, the need for blood, sexual release, and the intimacy and understanding only Will could provide. Will felt drunk on all of it.

The swimming feeling was likely due to blood loss. And he was poised to lose more. Hannibal’s tender, worshipful touch and gentle rhythmic thrusting shifted, turning on a dime, his arms bands of steel crushing Will to himself as he drove his cock relentlessly in and out. Will made a strangled, begging noise as sensation became overstimulation, and then he was

coming again, unable to draw breath, constricted as Hannibal's body went rigid with the agony of bliss.

Teeth in his neck, and then everything went black.

Will opened his eyes. Sparkling silver-white sunlight beamed through the gauzy curtains of the bedroom. Not the bedroom where he'd been with Hannibal last night, no. Hannibal must have moved him when he'd blacked out. Most of the window was coated with glowing, prismatic frost, but the upper panes revealed blue sky. The storm must have passed. He smelled coffee.

Will was tucked into the queen bed, bundled under the sheets and bedspread, with an extra fuzzy tartan blanket on top. His clothes from the night before were folded neatly on the wingback chair next to the bed, and his bag was on the floor beneath it. Hannibal had even thought to plug in his phone and leave it on the nightstand within reach. These little touches made Will smile, tired and drained as he was.

Gingerly, he sat up, the blankets pooling around his waist. The room was chilly, but it felt soothing on his sore muscles, of which there were many. He was still naked, but clean. Groaning, he got up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. A pair of moccasin-style slippers waited on the floor for his feet, and he found a luxurious gray robe made of some kind of plush synthetic material hanging on the back of the door.

The cabin was awash with light. It felt different during the day, beautiful, but starkly bright, vistas of diamond-crusted snow stretching for miles out the massive windows, interrupted by the peaks and pines, and black birds cutting through the sky.

The kitchen felt warmer, and smelled wonderful. A coffee pot on a timer merrily churned out dark liquid. Will picked up the coffee can on the counter and smiled at the label. French Quarter coffee and chicory, his favorite brand. And let's see if he'd remembered — yes. There was heavy cream in the fridge. Not half and half, and definitely not the disgusting flavored stuff. There were three dozen eggs and five pounds of bacon among the obscene amount of other groceries stuffed in the refrigerator. Hannibal was prepared, as always.

Will cooked some bacon and broke eggs into the grease, letting his mind wander. Hannibal was most certainly asleep in a windowless room in the basement of the cabin, his accommodations nowhere near as comfortable as where Will had spent the night. He wistfully envisioned being able to wake up next to Hannibal on a sunny morning like this, then brushed the thought aside.

After eating, he tidied up, and washed the liquor glasses from last night. He found the broken restraints in the trash, but there was another set already installed on the king bed in the master suite. The sheets had been stripped. He found them in the washer and transferred them to the dryer.

It was around noon, and the days were short, but he didn't savor the hours before sunset. Will got in the shower after examining his wounds from the night before. His hand was completely healed. The bite on his neck had also closed, but left a multi-colored bruise in its

wake, as usual. A wry little laugh escaped his lips. Four years ago, he and Hannibal had joked about him hiding the marks like a teenager covering up a hickey before going to school the next day. High-collared shirts, scarves, flesh-toned concealer, he'd done it all. Here, though, there was nobody to hide it from.

He showered, shaved, and put on jeans and a gray sweater with brown suede patches on the elbows and over the shoulders. He took special care with his hair, and rubbed on some insanely expensive cologne he'd bought at the duty-free shop at the airport, hoping it'd live up to Hannibal's standards.

Will wandered around the cabin aimlessly for a while, looking at the generic rustic decor and the holiday decorations, then fixed himself another cup of coffee. Settling into an overstuffed chair he had turned to face the enormous windows, he had the perfect view of a bird feeder that hung from a shepherd's hook that rose out of the snow. Once he stopped moving, creatures of all kinds crept or flew into view. Birds. Squirrels. Three elk. A flash of red near a tree that could have been a fox. Not long after that, a tremor of uneasiness trickled into his body.

He drained the coffee and set the cup aside, shifting uncomfortably in the chair. But it wasn't his body that was uncomfortable. He closed his eyes and breathed, slow and even, letting the golden pendulum in his mind out of its confines to do a kind of mental radar sweep. Beneath him, and a short way east, he could feel Hannibal's slumbering presence, the comforting darkness that encompassed him as he slept somewhere in the bottom floor of the house. But as Will meditated on Hannibal's signal, he became more aware of a growing sense of unease.

There were people coming. Whoever they were, they were agitated. It was full sunlight, so they couldn't be vampires. Still, a surprise visit was cause for alarm. No one except Hannibal knew he was here. It had to be someone from Daylight. Will shot to his feet and moved swiftly for the bedroom and his duffel bag. He entered the combination into a small gun case and opened it. Sliding the clip in, he put one in the chamber of his handgun, checked the safety, and slid it into his waistband, nestled against the small of his back. The sweater was thick enough that it concealed the weapon entirely.

He put on his boots and coat and stepped outside. The key to the cabin had been sitting in a Santa-shaped dish on a table near the exit. He used it to lock the door behind himself, and slipped the key into his pocket. If they wanted Hannibal, they'd have to go through as many barriers as possible, including him.

The mountain air was sharp, frigid against his warm skin, the whiteness and sunlight making him squint. The twitter of birdsong and the soft whisper of the pines gradually gave way to the persistent roar of a motor. Will stood on the porch and watched the snow-enveloped road. Before long, a snowmobile appeared with two people aboard. A slender figure was at the helm, wearing a black and gray puffer coat, a pink scarf over the bottom half of the face, and white-rimmed goggles. The person clinging on behind wore a luxurious silver fox-fur coat. The wind blew the puffy hood back; her head was protected with a woolen band, but the long wavy honey-brown hair that flowed out behind her was unmistakable.

"You have to be fucking kidding me," he snarled under his breath as the snowmobile came closer, eventually pulling up behind Hannibal's rental car. The first figure dismounted and

held out a hand for the woman. She took it and slid off gracefully, her equestrian-style boots sinking into the fresh powder. She adjusted the headband, took a few steps toward him, and stopped, her features tense with emotion. Her companion took off her goggles and tugged down the pink scarf, slipping the cap from her head. Dark hair tumbled free.

Alana Bloom. Daylight's first female Daywalker, created at the behest of Beverly and Bella. Chosen for her even temper, psychology background, and devotion to her ideals, she'd vowed to protect the innocent all across the globe from vampire influence. She and Will had… had sort of *thing* for a couple months at one point. It'd happened when Hannibal had left, before he'd hooked up with Nigel, but she'd rejected him pretty quickly.

The way I am isn't compatible… I wouldn't be good for you. You wouldn't be good for me. And, I wouldn't be able to stop analyzing because I have this professional curiosity about you.

Her words had hurt him in a way he couldn't describe for reasons he hadn't understood at the time. Looking back now, he realized why he'd kissed her in the first place. Hannibal had left him for refusing the gift. Everyone at Daylight treated him like he was tainted, and seemed to know all the details of their sex life. He swore he could hear whispers behind his back about the vampire hunter with the bloodsucker fetish, wondering how he could do his job when he really just wanted to spread his legs for every UnDead he was sent to kill.

Will had wanted to be *normal* . Wanted to prove he could be normal. And so he'd latched onto Alana. A fellow Daywalker, and a *woman* . They'd become such good friends, and so quickly – it was easy to imagine her as the companion he was supposed to have had, if he wasn't fucked up in the head. He'd spun a fantasy in his mind – a vampire hunting couple traveling the world together, a *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* or the ending of *True Lies* – and when they retired, hell, why not a house and children and a white picket fucking fence? At least he could bring her home to his dad and Aunt Louise at Christmas. She was the perfect rebound.

And maybe she'd known it, and that was why she'd rebuffed his romantic advances. Fair enough. She hadn't deserved to be used like that. Still, in the moment, it had hurt like no other pain he'd ever felt.

So fucking stupid. He'd been such an ass. Will knew he should forgive himself for his past ignorance, but he still couldn't let it go, not entirely. And while Alana had made the best decision for herself, he still held it against her.

And Margot Verger, wrapped in furs, stepping closer to Alana protectively, as if she was a Daywalker herself. Her face was wary and vaguely pitying. She slipped an arm around Alana, guiding her forward a few steps. Alana looked stricken. Heartbroken. He wished it didn't matter to him, that he didn't care at all, that her bloodshot eyes didn't make him shake.

"Will," Alana whispered, fresh tears slipping down her cheeks. "We almost lost you." Apparently she knew about the close call in Monaco, though no one knew the real story of how he'd escaped. She held her gloved hands over her mouth and nose as her shoulders shook, her river of dark hair glistening with strands of subtle red in the sunlight.

He came down off the porch and stood in the shin-deep snow, his hands in his pockets. Alana waited, fingers still over her lips, for a long moment, then turned back to look at Margot.

“Will,” Margot said, “Please. Let her.” A pause. “Please,” she repeated.

Will nodded ever so slightly.

Alana ran the last few paces and threw her arms around him, pressing her face into his neck. She shook with quiet sobs, her warm tears wetting the collar of his sweater. After a long moment, he took his hands out of his pockets and put his arms around her. Margot came closer, but still kept a respectful distance, the wind ruffling her hair and reddening her cheekbones.

Alana’s body against his brought everything back, a torrent of black-water memories. Finding out that Alana had chosen Margot instead. The way Alana had tried to make it right, tried to be the friend to Will she’d been before, as if nothing had happened. When Nigel came and disrupted everything at Daylight, she’d disapproved. It had only driven him into the Romanian’s arms. Will had found him a more than welcome distraction.

He pulled away from her embrace, gently at first, and then applied more force. At last, she released him and stepped back to stand by Margot. She pulled a tissue from her pocket — planned ahead, perhaps, knowing she’d be emotional — and wiped her eyes and nose. “You smell wonderful,” she said, and laughed at her own benign comment made in a meeting as momentous for this. Momentous for her, anyway, he figured. Painful and unnecessary for him.

Maybe not unnecessary. She’d been his champion. Fought for him. Stood up for him against Jack. Told Nigel to back off and give Will some time to heal, not that either of them had listened to that advice.

Will cared about her. Simple as that, or as complicated. But as he’d come to realize so clearly last night, forgiveness was too great and difficult for one person. It required two, and he wasn’t ready. Especially not here, not now, with Hannibal asleep in the darkness beneath the cabin. Daylight couldn’t know they’d reconnected.

After a long, rigid silence, Will came forward and offered Margot his hand. They shook, glove to glove, and then moved apart again. “Good to see you.”

“You too, Will.”

Alana sniffed and wiped her eyes again. “You look older. I know Bev says that the regeneration keeps us young, the serum… but...”

“I feel older.”

“What happened to your neck?” Alana motioned to her own creamy white throat.

Will’s heart seized and his fingers drifted unconsciously to the dark mark left by Hannibal’s exquisite bite. “This?” He paused a half a beat, hopefully not long enough for either of them

to notice. “A little reminder,” he explained. “Ran into some trouble in Monaco, but you, ah… you probably know that. I came here to lay low. How did you find me?”

“We asked Bella for help,” Margot said, drawing her hood against the side of her face where the wind was sharpest. “You used a credit card under one of your aliases to rent the Tahoe. Turns out it was lo-jacked in case of theft. She was able to trace it. We talked to the old man and he said you’d left it there looking for Constellation Road. This is the only house.”

“Wait, did Jack *send* you?” That would spell disaster. He had sworn to Jack on everything that mattered that he would never see Hannibal again, and if Jack was onto him, then so was the rest of Daylight. That meant Duncan. The Black Kaiser.

“No,” Alana said. “No, it was my idea to come. I told Bella I just… I was worried about you, after what happened with Le Chiffre. I know that mission was important to you, and I was worried you’d blame yourself for not getting the banking information.”

Margot shivered, the only one unprotected by Daywalker fortitude. Alana put an arm around her. “Could we come inside? It’s so cold.”

“No,” he said quickly. Too quickly, maybe. “It’s not safe. I came here to hide out, and if you found me this, ah… easily, well…” He trailed off ominously. “There’s always a chance Mason tracked me here and his people are on their way. If he gets a whiff of you, Margot, he won’t hesitate. You need to get out of here.”

Margot paled further, the cold reddening her cheeks now making them look livid and feverish. “I didn’t think… Lana, we better go…!”

“You didn’t think this through at all, did you?” Will said, his voice as sharp as the bitter wind. Then, like snow clearing from a branch, a question uncovered itself. “Why *are* you here? Why did you really come? You could have called.”

Margot looked helplessly at Alana. “I—” Alana tried, then trailed off. “We… didn’t want it on official channels. Calls could be monitored.”

“Yeah, Daylight doesn’t have any, uhm… qualms about spying on its own people – believe me, I know,” Will said darkly, crossing his arms. “So, you had to do it… face to face? Can’t imagine what’d be so important.”

“Tell him,” Margot advised. “We came all this way. Then we can leave – if Mason’s…”

Alana took a breath and exhaled flowing steam into the cold air. “There are… rumors,” she began.

Fuck , Will thought.

“You just got back from Monaco,” she went on, the breeze blowing strands of dark hair over her face. She brushed them away impatiently. “And someone apparently saw… Hannibal Lecter there around the same time.”

“He’s been warned to stay away from you, or Jack will have him killed,” Alana reminded him. “What I don’t understand is why he would risk it. Unless he’s switched sides. Or he has plans for you. Alana heard about this from Jack Ganzer—”

“You don’t need to trace back the gossip.” Anger churned his stomach and tasted bitter in the back of his throat. “It’s bullshit. He wasn’t there. I would have known.”

“He’s a predator. He could be stalking you without you knowing—”

“No.” Alana held up a hand. “Will would know if he was near, wouldn’t you?” Her blue eyes had gone hard, her fine features sharp in the bright but frigid sun. “All that work with Chilton on your empathy pulse, the electrostim to the brain to train you to tune in – to find vampire minds – you could *sense* his presence, couldn’t you, Will. Since you’re so *familiar* with it.”

“Think,” he growled, “ *hard*... about what you say next, Alana.”

“Will,” Margot warned, her arm still around Alana’s shoulders.

Alana’s voice erupted from her pale mouth. “He was there in Monaco, wasn’t he? And you knew it, but you didn’t care. Because you still *love* him! That goddamned monster, after everything he did to you, and to us–”

“Oh, and what exactly did he do to *you* ?” Will fired back. “He killed someone I loved, but why would you care? Abigail was just a bloodsucker, right? But he tried to make up for it. He made a deal with Jack to keep killing vampires for Daylight, even if he’s not allowed to see me. What else do you want from him?”

“He’s one of *them* !” she snarled. Margot held her arm in a vain attempt to keep her from getting in Will’s face. Alana pulled it free easily with Daywalker strength, though she only took a couple of steps closer, her lip quivering with anger. “Everyone knows what the two of you did, what you *let him* do to you – was it worth it? He *gutted you* , Will! You saw him in Monaco, didn’t you? *Didn’t you?* ”

“Get the fuck out of here.” Without realizing it, he’d lifted the gun out of his waistband and held it at his side.

“Just have it out!” Margot insisted frantically. “We came all this way, and we need to get out of here. So let’s put all this to bed.”

“Speaking of putting things to bed, how is it, Margot? Kind of, ah… *counterproductive* to the whole Verger Baby thing, isn’t it? I’m sure Ganzer’d be happy to knock you up.”

“There’s no need–”

“Oh, really? Tell that to *her* .” Will pointed at Alana with the handgun, and she glared furiously over the barrel back at him, defiantly unafraid. “You came all the way up here in the snow to accuse me of fucking a vampire, isn’t that right? So it’s only fair that I get to ask about your sex life.”

“I came here because I care about you!”

“Even though we’re, ah, we’re n-not *compatible* ?” His voice was as cold as the icicles that dripped gently from the eves. “Admit it – you saw me a-as tainted, because of who I’d been with. Vampirism as an STD or something, even though Bev used their DNA to make the serum. It’s inside you right now, Alana.”

“Stop,” Alana ordered, pointing a gloved finger at him. “You know I was protecting us both by putting up boundaries. It’s not fair for you to be angry with me for looking out for myself *and* trying to protect you! I advocated for you, Will, I tried to put a buffer between you and Crawford. You didn’t need a lover; you needed a *friend* . But you didn’t see it then, and you don’t see it now. I’m done, Will. Next time Jack pushes you too hard or sends you on some suicide mission, I’m just going to let him.” She was crying again. Margot pulled on her arm, trying to guide her back to the snowmobile, though her attempt was unsuccessful.

“Guess you dodged a bullet with me,” Will sneered, his body trembling with rancor, though his voice was soft, just loud enough to be heard over the wind that buffeted the side of his face with ice crystals.

“I don’t feel like I dodged a bullet,” Alana said, her voice watery, eyes red. “I feel wounded. Because no matter what I do, what any of us do to try and save you, you’ll never be free of him, will you?”

Something tore inside of Will as he lied, the falsehoods like razors slicing up his tongue and lips even as he spoke. But the pain eased up as he revealed more and more truth, his confession a balm, as ill-advised as it was. “Let me say this slowly so you understand. I am not with Hannibal again. I never will be. I’ll never see him again, but not because I promised Jack Crawford and I promised Bev and Bella. Because Jack made it clear that if Hannibal came anywhere near me, he was going to turn the sun on him. *And I don’t want that* . Because you’re right, Alana. I’ll never be free. I still love him, and I don’t want him to die.” *Fuck. Goddamn it, why do you keep talking?* his brain screamed. “I don’t know where he is, and I haven’t seen him in five years. Now get the fuck out of here. I’m supposed to be in *hiding* , remember?”

“Fine.” Margot finally got Alana back to the snowmobile. But before she climbed on, Alana called back to him, “Whose car is that?” and jerked her chin toward the rental in the driveway, plastered in snow. “Who’s here with you, Will?”

Will just shook his head. Alana pulled on her goggles, fired up the snowmobile, and they sped away. Margot didn’t look back.

The room is as black as a pre-creation universe, but I don’t need a light source to see the face of my wristwatch. One minute to sunset. I wait as patiently as I can, rubbing the side of my forefinger against my thumb hard enough to make it skid across my skin. The time comes. I wait until the minute has passed, and then push the door open with enough force to tear it completely free of not only the duct tape around the molding, but the hinges as well.

I pause and go corpse-still, willing myself to relax, to muzzle the beast, a three-headed Cerberus in my heart snapping and slavering. At last, I pull on my black robe with the white piping, tying the sash just so. I climb the stairs and emerge from the cabin’s basement, my

steps even, my face arranged. I find Will in an overstuffed white leather chair, turned toward the window as the last rays of light disappear behind the mountains. A bottle of whiskey sits at the small table by his side, along with the Christmas-tree shaped candy dish he's using for an ashtray. Smoke spirals up and dissipates before reaching the rustic beams of the cabin's ceiling.

I pause, suddenly hesitant. Will turns slightly, raising the cigarette to his lips, his profile devastatingly beautiful against the mountain twilight. "Hey, darlin'," he says with quiet exhaustion, exhaling smoke. I cross the distance and kneel at his side. His eyes are still fixed on the mountains, a twist of brittle resignation on his face that claws at my heart. Bending my neck, I rest my head in Will's lap and take his hand, surveying the snowy scene out the window as well. Will gives me a reassuring squeeze, then releases his grip, using his fingers instead to stroke my cool cheek, leaving warm contrails.

I relish the sensation for a few moments, then sit up and look at him. His eyes are bloodshot. "We had unwelcome visitors today," he says.

"I heard," I confess.

"Everything?"

I nod.

Will looks directly at me. The unspoken question hangs heavy between us. I burn to ask it – them. *Did you mean what you said? Do you love me? Did you say that to hurt Alana, or because it was the truth?*

But I can't make my mouth form the words. Will drops his cigarette into the dish and reaches for me, drawing me up to sit half on his lap and half on the wide, puffy arm of the chair. I slip an arm around him and Will cradles me close, tenderly.

"Do you think she was telling the truth? That Jack didn't send her?" Airport duty shop or no, Will's cologne is exquisite, mingled perfectly with the scent of the blood that flows just beneath his skin. Where I've rested my head, I can see Will's pulse throb on the side of his neck.

"I do," Will replies, stroking my hair. "She never lies. But if she and Margot asked Bella for help finding me, there's a good chance Jack's, ah… *aware* that something's up."

I listen to Will's precious heart, his mortal breathing. My mind is blank as the undisturbed snow outside, glowing now in the moonlight.

Will sighs. "We have to leave. It's not safe." His voice thickens. "And we can't be together. If Jack gets wind of this, he'll give the order. He'll send Vizla. I'm… I can't protect you from *him* ." He frees one of his arms to lift the whiskey bottle to his lips. "I don't know what I'm gonna do. I can't—" I feel his warm tears against the side of my face; they're acidic against my heart. "Figures we'd only get a few weeks together before something forced us apart again."

Unacceptable, this resignation. I reach up and tilt Will's stubbled chin so he looks at me again. "Would you give me up so easily?" My own ears find the fragility of my voice alarming.

"I won't get you killed. I refuse. I won't be responsible for that."

"Will," I whisper, my dark, guarded, hardened heart consumed with fire as the coals of my love for him are stoked afresh, "remember what I said. I am what I am because of you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. And now you're in danger because of me."

I shake my head with a gentle smile. "I've lived a long time, beloved, but I am not *alive* unless I can have you. So let them come. Even this Black Kaiser you're so afraid of."

"Hannibal, no—"

I place a finger over Will's warm lips. Pull him close, and kiss him now, the slightest brush. "I told you in Monaco I would give myself to the sun before I let anything or anyone separate us again. Let Jack do his worst." I pause, letting the words be absorbed by both of us. " Humanity has existed for a hundred thousand years. In that time a hundred billion human lives have had beginnings and ends."

"Not yours," Will argues, letting his tongue touch his lower lip, hoping, I think, for remnants of me. "You're immortal, aren't you?"

"No more immortal than the vampires Daylight Inc. slaughters." He tries to interrupt me again, but I soothe him back to silence. "I know, one day, my time will come. And I find the thought comforting. The thought that my life could end at any moment frees me to fully appreciate the beauty and art and horror of everything this world has to offer. I'm not afraid. Are you?"

"Not if you're with me." Will's shimmering eyes widen as if his own words surprise him.

Then be with me. Fully. Accept my gift, my mind pleads, but I silence its keening just in time. Instead, I say, "It's settled then." I climb out of Will's lap and stand, holding out a hand. Will takes it, and gets to his feet. "You and I, together, to the end."

Will nods, stepping into my embrace. I brush a tear away from beneath Will's eye with my thumb. Even his tears are warm. I ache for his heat – blood, breath, skin, love. "No tears, beloved. The end doesn't have to come so quickly. Keep them guessing. Let them chase us. They have no proof that we were together in Monaco." I bring Will's warm, pliable hand to my lips to kiss his scarred knuckles. "Shall we make a game of it?"

A slow smile spreads over Will's face. Every other centimeter of its curve oscillates between innocent joy and something cleverly wolfish. He turns, grabbing the whiskey bottle, and raises it to his lips for a long drink. "Fuck it," he laughs, sputtering a bit, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Yes, yes, fucking yes."

The bottle falls on the floor as I capture him in my arms. I lift him, and Will wraps his legs around my waist, burying our mouths together. My heart's beam, my Will, his lips a mix of honeyed liquor and hot blood.

I carry him effortlessly to the master suite, our mouths still locked together, and set him on the freshly made bed. Just before I can kiss him again, he halts my advance. "Hold on. I have something for you."

Will slips out of my arms and off the bed, opening his small travel bag. Rooting through it, he comes up with a cheap-looking Nokia. "Burner phone. It's untraceable." He hands it to me and the screen lights up. Fully charged with a preset purple gradient background. Will produces another identical device. "The only number programmed into it will call this one. I don't trust Daylight not to be looking at my texts or my call records."

I activate the phone's camera application and point it at Will, snapping a picture when he's not looking. "Hey," he protests with a wry smile.

"Lovely," I say, and it is. "I suppose it'd be too much to ask you for something a bit more risque."

Will laughs hard, tucking his phone back in his duffel bag. "All the dick pics you'd ever want, I promise."

I turn off the phone and beckon him back to me. We settle on the pillows. I hook a leg over his, holding him as close as possible, relishing the warmth that radiates through his clothing, the heat of hand that he places on the small of my back as we lay face to face. I let Will's dark brown hair slip silkenly between my fingers as I brush it behind his ear. "No more tears, Will. You've shed enough for this lifetime"

Will shakes his head. "No more." He smiles, lips closed but eyes shining.

"Have they cleared the snow from the road?"

"Yeah. Somebody came by this morning and plowed the driveway so I'm assuming the road's clear."

I nod. "Well then. I'll leave tonight. But you ought to stay. Disappearing immediately suggests you have something to hide." I kiss Will's lower lip, just a feather-light touch. "We'll play their game. I'll still kill my own kind, whoever I come across. And you'll still carry out Jack Crawford's missions, track down Mason Verger, all of it."

"But wherever I go, you'll follow."

"That's right."

Will sighs and rolls away from me on the bed, sitting up with slumped shoulders. "I wish we could stay. A week, like you'd planned. Everything was perfect. I loved… every *second* of it."

I bend at the waist and slide closer, wrapping my arms around him from behind, resting my face against his back, listening to his heart through the braided pattern of his beige sweater. After years apart, I can't stand to be near him without touching him, breathing in his scent, reveling in his warmth. I drained him last night and already I'm suffering emptiness again, greedy for more. It's right there, his blood. Just under the vulnerable layers of his skin and the walls of his circulatory system.

Today, he said he loved me. To someone else, yes, and in anger, yes, but he said it. I am monumentally grateful for his forgiveness, so much so that I didn't dare hope that Love would pay him a visit again. I slip my fingers under the hem of his sweater and push it up and over his head, setting it aside. I lay my hands gently on his neck, letting his skin adjust to my touch, then smooth them down his back. "Today was difficult for you. I'm sorry Alana's unexpected visit upset you." I tease my fingers down his spine. "You're very tense." If last night proved anything, it's that Will has sorely missed my massage techniques. Nigel had been much more vulnerable to this particular seduction technique, but it's worth trying again on Will now.

"Mmm. That's a good spot..." Will hums. I dig my knuckle into a hard knot just below his shoulder blade. "Right there. Oh, c'mon, darlin', you can push harder than that."

I hum quietly as he flops down face-first onto the bed. I work at the tension in Will's neck and shoulders with clinical effectiveness, telling him about his strained anatomy and what he ought to have done to avoid it. He teases me and says he's not used to playing doctor like this. Under the remaining essence of cologne and soap and laundry detergent coming from his clothing, I can smell him, his true scent, and the more I work, the stronger it grows, a pheromone stirred up by my ministrations. I lose my clinical edge and my touch becomes less about relief than worship.

I settle gently onto the top of his pelvic bones and lean forward to kiss the back of his ear lobe, then the side of his neck, then down his spine. Stopped by the band of his jeans, a pity, forced to edge my way back up, running my hands over his and up and down his arms, making love to the knife scar on his back, the one that ruined his rotator cuff, the damage long undone by Beverly's scientific miracles. And it is miraculous, something divine that defies reason, the stuff of legends. There were long stretches of time when I thought I would never see this wound-shadow again.

Will stirs, his breathing broadening, deepening. At last, as though he can no longer keep himself at bay, he turns over and sits up. I allow this, and welcome the hungry kiss that blankets his mouth and then moves down my own throat, to the hollow of my clavicle. Will drags open the tie holding my robe closed and pushes the garment from my shoulders, his warm, dangerous hands caressing me through the silk pajama set I wore to bed – though bed was little more than a cot in a lightless furnace room, I've found that following the proper daytime rituals can make any space more comfortable. A little luxury goes a long way.

I place my hand gently on Will's sternum and push him back down on the bed. Will's eyes burn, alight with fresh desire, the gold around his pupil gleaming like a halo in the dim light. His lips are flushed, so alive, everything about him heartbreakingly beautiful, as always.

I trace my fingers from Will's defined shoulder down to his elbow, then lift his right wrist. Will expects tenderness, surely, after his sweet treatment up until this moment. He's the most unpredictable creature I know, but I can be unpredictable too. Guiding his flesh to my mouth, I drive my teeth in, too swiftly for him to react, breaching where the veins rise close to the skin. Will inhales sharply, pulling fruitlessly against my grip, squeezing my hip with his other hand. I drink, just enough to coat my tongue, then lick the wound.

Will makes a soft sound, pleasure behind a veil. I guide the bloody wrist into one of the second set of restraints I attached to the bed as Will slept off our first encounter. Of course I came prepared; he and I have broken almost every form of bondage imaginable. Will used to joke about writing scathing online reviews for the companies that produce them. I buckle Will in tightly, then constrict another notch against the rapidly healing flesh.

I lift Will's other hand and he resists, eyes alight with passionate fury. When I first met Jack Crawford, he told me Will was a fighter. Not just because of the warrior-like nature of his calling, but because his empathy had tried to wrestle him away from his true self throughout his entire life. Most of the time his mental compass spins as if thrown off by unknown magnetic forces or supernatural powers. But it always finds north again. I must ensure that I'm standing in that direction when it does.

I hold him easily, and I know he doesn't want me to stop. But he knows me well, and a struggle is a wonderful aphrodisiac.

Even now he's hooking a leg through mine, as if to try one of his practiced martial maneuvers, throwing me off him. The way his scent wafts up to me as his pores open and the sweat of his labors glistens on his skin is intoxicating.

I have a countermove. I don't let go of his wrist, but I bend his fingers, taking the first two into my mouth, sucking hard, circling them with the powerful wet muscle of my tongue.

Checkmate. Will relaxes his body and lets me strap him into the restraint, leaving him deliciously helpless, stretched out on the bed with his wrists clamped tightly to the thick headboard. I take my time undressing him the rest of the way, delighting in the way my cool touch makes Will's flesh rise up as the fine hairs stand on end. I strip him of his clothing and the trials of the day, of the threat of Daylight Inc and the words flung at him by the insufferable Miss Bloom and her partner, Miss Verger. I wonder about killing them, but those are musings for another day. I want to be here, in this moment, capturing every detail for the memory palace.

Sliding the cool silk of my clothing from my body, I mount the bed, lean in, and nuzzle Will's throat. The scent of blood mingling with that perfume of his is unnervingly perfect. I kiss his neck again and again, moving from below his ear down to the collarbone and back up again, every so often pressing my teeth against the skin, but never breaking it.

Will's breathing comes short and fast, and his heart thunders beneath his ribs, so loud I have no problem hearing it. "Do it," he begs at last. "I can't stand it, please—"

I reach between his legs without warning and caress his hard cock, spreading the pearl along his shaft. A few firm strokes is all it takes, and I drive my teeth home into the tenderest spot

on the side of Will's throat. Will doesn't make a sound, or can't, and is only able to close his eyes and utter a long, breathless gasp. When the tremors of his climax die away, I take him roughly, with little more than a palmful of lubricant and a few intrusions of my fingers, too many and too fast.

And then I am inside of him, holding his hips up tirelessly as he curls his legs around me, straining against his bonds, growling out begging moans, ragged with agony and insisting on more, faster, harder, no interest in his own pleasure, only in being colonized by me.

There is still one more way I can penetrate him, a final intrusion. At the edge of my impending orgasm I drag him up from the mattress, his arms stretching back in an exaggerated crucifixion. I hold him by the small of his back, keeping him on my cock, desperate for his tight heat. A final thrust and I sink my teeth in as deep as I can, and drink with all my might. A cascade of hot sunlight-soaked blood pours into me, filling every dull, dead corner and bringing back back to light and life. Light of my life. Will.

When I have my senses again, I find myself laying on top of Will's unconscious body, clutching it with so much possessive force I've left red marks behind, and oozing scratches on his shoulders in addition to the ragged bite. His breathing is deathly shallow and his petal skin is even paler, his smattering of freckles stark against the corpse-like pallor.

But like the dawn he'll rise again, a celestial miracle brought about not by heaven but the microscope and test tube. Perhaps God did reach out with a golden finger and touch Beverly Katz's mind; he is matchless in his irony, after all.

I unbuckle Will tenderly from his restraints, then bring a cloth and wipe him down before tucking him tightly into bed. I tidy up the cabin, set the coffee maker's timer, and make a quiche. All Will has to do is the baking, and he'll have plenty to eat and regain his strength.

At last, everything is in order. I start the rented car and clean off the snow, then return for a final goodbye. Will is still asleep, though his breathing's better.

Weary angel. Falling from heaven certainly takes it out of you.

I kiss his hair, his forehead, his lips, and tear myself away. A shame to cut short our time together, and during the holidays as well. But the thrill of a game against Jack Crawford and Daylight piques my curiosity. And tonight has renewed every hope I've ever had.

Will may yet accept my gift, and walk the ages at my side.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

The Timeline takes us back to the night Hannibal Lecter joined Daylight, Inc. and meets Will Graham, the operation's first Daywalker.

Baltimore, April, 2011

There is a dog sniffing through garbage bags stacked in the alley. She looks up as I approach. Animals, as a rule, don't care for my presence, and this one is no exception. She whimpers, then flees.

I am enjoying the April night's wind and the effect I seem to have had on Jack Crawford and his team of vampire hunters, Daylight, Inc. We met in public, of course, just after sunset, and discussed our collaboration. I liked Jack, and his wife Bella even more, despite their chosen vocation. I'd arranged the meeting because I was curious about them, especially after their hunter dispatched an old friend of mine with such apparent ease. Not that the world was better with Donald Sutcliffe in it. I didn't mourn him, but his murder proved that not only were the rumors about a vampire hunting black operations team true, Daylight, Inc was a force to be reckoned with.

I'd gone into the meeting not knowing what to expect. I might have killed them all in the full view of witnesses, should I have felt the need.

But that is not what came to pass, because I met a man named Will Graham.

When whispers began about a creature colloquially referred to as a Daywalker, I made no assumptions. Perhaps the rumors were true, and a new predator had emerged, this one birthed not from the Devil but a test tube, a human with the powers of the UnDead. A vicious fighter who seemed to be able to read the minds of vampires and anticipate their movements, with the uncanny ability to, perhaps, see the world in their point of view. Perhaps even read their minds.

The reality of this hunter is something exceptional. An unholy wedding of vampire and man, though I believe his ability to empathize with the worst of the monsters is something he comes by naturally.

If vampires are snakes, fanged things, the Devil in a serpent's shape, then this man, Will Graham, this Daywalker, is a mongoose. And he has made me curious.

His scent was entirely unique. I could smell his blood running through his veins, hiding just beneath his skin, and it was everything I could do not to taste it that very second. If I were three centuries younger, I wouldn't have had the self-control.

Now, the meeting is done, the tentative alliance forged. I followed them back to their base of operations without their knowledge. I prowl the neighborhood now, too agitated to do anything else but walk and think about Will Graham.

I am an atypical figure (well dressed, European in looks) in this neighborhood. Bars, nightclubs, restaurants, teeming with life. A pair of intoxicated young women with unnaturally orange skin – some kind of suntan-in-a-bottle – brush past me, oblivious, tripping over their absurdly shaped shoes. "Oh my God – I'm sorry!" one of them calls over her shoulder and her companion agrees. There, they've saved their lives by being polite.

I smile and walk on, weaving in and out of shadow, careful never to step directly under a street light. For a while I follow a pack of young people in baggy clothing who reek of marijuana, then change direction and stalk two perfumed boys who have just illegally parked their father's Porsche. Then, I catch *his* scent.

As if conjured from my consciousness, there he is – the Daywalker himself, smelling of machine oil and the remnants of the same atrocious aftershave he wore to the meeting. Underlying it, the scent of warm honey and liquid sunlight merged with that of a human body and the underlying succulent blood. He's walking with his shoulders hunched, avoiding contact of any kind with others, glasses on, dressed in denim pants with a hole in the knee and a plaid shirt splattered with some kind of industrial solvent that burns my nose. All this in contrast to the young people around him having a night on the town.

He turns and I follow. Down an alley we come to what appears to be a bar; a squat brown building, two stories of dirt, fliers and posters plastered on every available surface. The rank smell of beer seems to draw him in. Or, perhaps, it is the music pouring forth from this place: a mixture of modern rock and traditional blues, featuring drums, bass, guitars, and harmonica. I wait, so as not to alert him, and take a moment to remove my sportcoat, draping it over my arm, and roll up the sleeves of my burgundy shirt, opening another button at my neck, lest my appearance draw too much attention.

Good; the lighting is scanty at best. Lucifer's teeth, it's ugly. I don't see the Daywalker on the first floor, so I ascend the rickety wooden stairs to the second. My senses are assaulted as I allow myself to be sucked into the thronging young people, enveloped in mortal scent, tantalized at every turn by tender throats exposed as if offered.

I catch sight of Will Graham again, looking sweaty and uncomfortable, edging along a wall towards the foot of the stage. Perhaps it's perception after the fact, but he doesn't strike me as human. There is no sense of belonging in this crowd; obviously he's less than sociable, but the sense goes beyond his clothes and posture. *Not like me* , comes the thought, *but not like them, either* .

The room is deliciously warm with the combined heat of human bodies, the band flogging their instruments, sweat glimmering in their hair. The Daywalker pauses to unbutton his work shirt and remove it, revealing a white tee-shirt dampened with perspiration.

I leer from my place at a cafe table where I've been unceremoniously accepted by a group of young women, having ingratiated myself from the moment I paid for the most recent pitcher of beer. Will Graham has a secret, one he may not know he's keeping. He's beautiful. Good lean body, exquisite facial features, sweaty chestnut-amber curls falling into his eyes, his eyes – glimmering with a sheen of unnatural gold, caused, I assume, by the Daywalker serum.

Will Graham fights his way to a group of older men in the denim and leather that often denotes motorcycle enthusiasts. He is welcomed, but doesn't seem to feel it, handed a plastic cup of beer he drinks quickly as if to rush through the expected socialization. He tries to speak to one of the men, a fellow with a rusty beard, but can't be heard over the music. Irritation twitches over his features and he settles against the wall near the table of people he seems to know, forced to wait for the set to end.

I realize I could watch him forever. But the last two songs end. The band thanks the cheering audience graciously. The drummer steps up to the microphone, and reminds everyone that Doppelganger Dust Bowl tee shirts, pins, and stocking caps can be purchased at a table near the bar and thanks everyone for coming. Very polite, for a rock musician with a face full of piercings. I know all too well how deceiving appearances can be.

I listen to the women at the table with half an ear, watching the Daywalker try again to speak to the man he's come to see. His queries are answered by a manly clap on the back and another beer he begrudgingly accepts. As he drinks it, however, he edges up against the wall, far from where the merry group's attention is focused. Once in a while, someone leans over to speak with him, but the conversations don't last long. He seems more than simply overwhelmed by the number of people crammed into the dingy barroom; it's like he has to protect himself from them, though physically he is in no danger at all – provided the Daylight serum works as Dr. Katz explained. Once, I think he might have glanced my way. My heart makes an unexpected lurching movement in my chest, my ribs a silent cave of organ systems I no longer need. But then again, perhaps he was staring at the loud group of people that entered just at that moment, all wearing matching tee-shirts celebrating *Kimberly's Bachelorette Party – Watch Out Baltimore!*

Despite the arrival of (presumably) Kimberly and her retinue – or, perhaps, because of it – the crowd is thinning. I suffer an unfamiliar twinge of longing as the Daywalker follows the bearded man out a back door behind the stage. Several people with cans and bottles of beer are now coming in and out of this door, so I follow.

I blend in as I can with these overheated humans and ignore their myriad scents and the thrummings of their mortal hearts. Through the door is a flight of rickety wooden stairs, at the bottom of which idles a black transport van blocking the alleyway. The band is here with some of the more devoted fans, loading their equipment. A low-laying concrete wall fences in a shabby beer garden, a few girls sitting prettily on it, shapely legs crossed, feet bouncing.

There. The Daywalker, leaning into and then out of the van. He comes up with a cardboard box, holding it steady with one arm and opening the lid. Inside are two art deco era wall sconces, decorated with gold-painted whorls, their clouded shades in remarkable condition despite their age. One might say the same about me.

Will Graham inspects their components. The drummer hands him another beer. He drinks from it absently and sets it on the top of the van to resume his examination by the weak, yellowed dome light of the van's interior. I let myself delight in the confident way he seems to have found at last, haggling with the bearded man over the price of these items.

At last, Will puts the box down and opens his wallet. Withdrawing a few bills, he passes them to the bearded man, who suggests a toast to seal the deal. Will retrieves his beer and indulges him, a faint smile at last.

I linger near the corner of another building in the shadows, enjoying voyeurism, as I always do. When I heard the legends of the Daywalker passed in hushed voices through the vampire underworld, I imagined him as a soldier, in tactical gear, puffed up with masculine threat and armed with technology, sporting a buzz cut and wrap-around sunglasses, perhaps with an American flag motif on the frames. Will Graham surprises me, which is a rare thing after centuries. I find I like imagining him killing my kind.

Eternal beings are not entirely eternal. Their deaths can be brought about in a number of ways, the most horrifying and gristly of which is decapitation and burning of the body. This act the Daywalker had done on more than one occasion to a nocturnal immortal. Many of the young vampires of America have learned this the hard way.

It chills me delightfully to imagine him killing, shaking off any shreds of discomfort or self doubt, and becoming a magnificent predator. Before I fully form the thought, my words whisper his name. " *Will."*

The boy's head suddenly lifts up from where he is leaning on the low wall, having been drawn into conversation with one of the young women. His eyes flash. As though he heard me, though it would be physically impossible, or should be. His gaze climbs slowly over the alley and the courtyard and finally settles on me where I linger at the corner of the next building west. A long moment passes as I feel an uncomfortable sensation in my head, as if there is a massive shift in barometric pressure.

Will quickly consumes the last of his beer and leaves the bottle in place of himself on the wall, giving the girl a brief goodbye that leaves her confused. He picks up his box of light sconces, and takes his leave, making his way down the dingy alley, dodging oily puddles. I follow.

Soon, we are on the Johns Hopkins campus, deserted this time of night. The landscape has been fitted with hundreds of baubles of light; it pours over the Greek Revival buildings creating sharply contrasting shadows. At first I keep back, almost a block behind him, but it is as though another force, a force outside of myself, compels me, closing the distance. Soon I am a mere ten steps behind, my predator's feet silent. If Will Graham is aware of my presence, he makes no indication. And then he does, pausing in front of the Peabody Library, bathed in artificial light.

He climbs half the stone stairs, sits, sets down the box. Reaching into his breast pocket, he withdraws a pack of cigarettes and lights one, eyes fixed on me where I've stopped on the pavement below. Where he avoided eye contact with nearly everyone he encountered tonight, he fixes me with a penetrating stare, the glowing ember of his cigarette caught in the gold

loop around his pupil. I had a brief moment of this at the meeting, but now I am caught, a prisoner in a searchlight. He's reading me, assessing my intention. Knows what I am, and is, intoxicatingly, unafraid.

"Well?" he asks brusquely, smoke curling out of his nose. "Did I, ah… pass your little *test* ?"

I smile, a gentle curve, revealing no hint of my fangs. Just like in the primate world, vampire teeth should only be shown to intimidate. "I was curious," I admit.

"You, ah… hitched your star to Daylight already. Why test me now, unless the whole thing was a setup?" I can feel him coiling, ready to leap to his feet and, likely, tackle me from the high ground and bury a knife in my heart.

"Would you believe it was serendipity? That I happened to be out walking and caught sight of you?"

"Nothing about you happens without a reason."

He's right. I should apologize and take my leave, before I ruin the connection made tonight. But I find myself unable to follow my own good advice.

Will takes a drag from his cigarette, looking up at me through an errant curl that stirs in the night wind, eyes flinty, hard. "When I find myself being stalked down in the dead of night by one of *your* kind," he said, the emphasis on 'your' curling with disgust, "they're usually trying to kill me."

"Pure curiosity, I assure you. We are both creatures with the same gifts, though they vary between the two of us."

"Yeah," Will says. "I don't kill people and drink their blood, for one thing." He takes another drag.

"You have nothing to fear. You have dispatched my kindred before, quite effectively I'm told. Your victims were much younger than me, granted, but the fact remains. Perhaps I should be afraid of *you* ." Oh, that's delightful. I relish a series of images that my mind gives to me like splendidly-wrapped gifts – Will Graham sitting on my chest with his hands locked around my throat, the cords in his arms and neck visible with the effort.

"You hear about the one I did last week? Found her in Vegas cheating at blackjack and eating sex workers." He scoffs. "Tasteless."

"Do you have trouble with taste?" I'd have no trouble tasting him. The wind shifts, bringing me his Daywalker scent, an olfactory warm honey.

"My thoughts are not often tasty," he says, flicking ash.

"Over the centuries, one learns to construct effective barriers." I've taken another step closer to the end of the staircase. A car passes, blaring bass-heavy music, dopplering to us and then fading away.

“I make forts.” He flicks ash on the stone stairs again, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. His eyes are watchful, but no longer so powerfully focused. He must have finished his analysis. I’m dying to know what he found.

“Associations come quickly.”

“So do forts.”

I edge closer, dropping my voice as a rowdy group of students passes on the sidewalk near the street. Closer to be heard over their drunken laughter, but closer to get another delicious lungful of his scent. “I imagine what you see and learn in this line of work touches everything else in your mind. And treated with a serum made from the creatures you’ve been designed to kill – your values and decency are present yet shocked at your associations. Appalled by your dreams. No forts in the bone arena of your skull for the things you love.”

“Yeah, we all know you got your psych degree through night school or whatever,” he growls. “Don’t psychoanalyze me *Doctor Lecter* . You won’t like me when I’m psychoanalyzed.”

“I’m sorry, Will. Observing is what we do. I can’t shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off.”

“What *we* do?” he cocks his head a few degrees to one side.

“As hunters,” I say.

He fixes me in his gaze again, trying to peel back my layers. “Hunters,” he repeats.

“With the same quarry,” I remind him.

“Yeah, these days. After how many, ah… centuries of murder?” But the tension in his shoulders dissolves in increments. The spring uncoils. “Or is it rude to ask a vampire his age?”

I sidestep the question to take a few more steps forward instead, casual, my hands in my pockets. “Why did you purchase those sconces? Authentic?”

He smiles wryly, but I can see the pleasure flit across his features, a response to my inquiry. “Doing some restoration work. Yeah, they’re the real deal. Came from the theater when the previous owners were just, ah… hocking stuff.”

“Theater?”

He pales. Said too much.

“Were you in historical restoration before your time with Daylight?”

“No, it’s just something I do that… isn’t Daylight.” He runs his teeth over his bottom lip. When it emerges from his mouth, I can see the sheen of saliva glimmer. “It’s an old movie theater. The, uhm… classic movie palace. Already had the foundation fixed. I rewired it myself. Working on the interior now.”

“You’re talented in more ways than killing my kind.” As I say the words, I wonder what other talents he might have, once he trusts me enough to show them.

He takes a final drag from his cigarette and stands, dropping it on the step and crushing it with his foot. “Good to be… *well-rounded* .”

A quiet moment passes. “I know you’re not gonna tell me,” he says, “but I’m the curious sort too. Why are you doing this? Agreeing to… kill your own kind?”

“I’m sure you can see the advantages.”

“I want to hear you say it.”

“Do you believe in atonement? That a man might have a ledger in red or black?” I’m struck by the fine structure of his face. I wonder if he plies his charms to get close before dispatching his victims. Though if he has any, I haven’t seen them. It’s hard to imagine this grumpy vampire hunter seducing a predator even if death is his secret agenda.

Will softens, though by a tiny measure. “Dunno if you can… weigh lives like that, looking for a-a *balance* . How many humans equals one vampire?”

“Bad math, to be sure.”

“So show me some solid arithmetic,” comes his challenge.

I wait for another loud vehicle to pass on the street. I’ve made it to the base of the steps now. “Change is a constant,” I say. “The world’s change, however, has accelerated. I see this alliance as mitigation.”

This answer seems to satisfy him more. He nods, getting to his feet and picking up his box of sconces. “You should stay away until Jack calls for you. He might get suspicious otherwise. I know you sold him on that ledger shit, and I get it – atonement goes down a lot easier than ‘if you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em.’”

“I’ll take that under advisement.”

“See you around, I guess.” He descends the stairs, but as he passes me, something terrible and wonderful happens happens. I know this venture is tenuous. I know it all hangs by a thread and discretion is key. I’ve already overplayed my cards tonight. And yet, my hand moves, closing around his arm just above the elbow. Will’s body goes rigid, and the look he gives me is pure murder. Beautiful. He has the grim determination of Judith in Artemisia’s depiction of Holofernes’s murder. I can feel his muscle, even through the shirt. His tissues hold the same power as my own, flexible granite, bones made of diamond.

Perhaps the boy *could* kill me, despite my centuries of cunning and time-gathered strength. One false move would bring the end that must one day come. Let it be by his hands, my blood spraying over his face. “I’d like to continue our conversation,” I say.

“Why?” Will steps away, testing, I think, whether or not I will release him. I do. “I don’t see what else we have to say to each other.”

“We’ll be working together. The success of our venture relies on the two of us trusting one another in a partnership.”

Nothing but a flippant, scoffed laugh in response

“I would apologize for my ambush, but I know I will soon be apologizing again and you’ll tire of that eventually. I’ll have to use apologies sparingly.”

“Just keep it professional,” Will says, hefting his box and shifting it to the other arm.

“Or we could socialize like adults,” I suggest, grasping at straws. I can’t let him go, not now. More. More of everything, his glimmering eyes, his scent, the way he looks at me with the pout of disdain, the threat he poses. I keep my voice openly neutral, tinted with hope. “God forbid we become friendly.”

“Friendly,” Will repeats, with a twist of irony. “I don’t find you all that interesting.”

“You will,” I vow, tilting my head with a tease of a smile.

He furrows his brow, opens his mouth to retort. And then closes it, looking at me, then at the grass of the library’s lawn. Then up at the moon. I fancy his cheeks are rosy all of the sudden. “All right,” he relents. “You want to talk? We’ll talk. My place. Look at me wrong and I’ll fucking kill you.”

“As you wish.” It is a monumental struggle to keep my smile closed-lipped and unthreatening.

“This way,” he says, heading back towards the street.

We walk in an expectant silence. Will leads me a few blocks through the chill night, his breath crystallizing before him and disappearing. I don’t produce enough heat for the same effect. Breathing is relatively optional for me at this stage in my un-life. The neighborhood has quieted, though there are still a few shouts in the distance as the bars are flushed out for closing time.

This street borders a less affluent neighborhood and a struggling commercial area to match. The only people nearby linger because they have nowhere else to go. They gather on the stoops of boarded up shops with bottles of liquor or marijuana cigarettes. “Hey baby,” one woman greets Will as we approach the light pole she’s leaning against, the wind ruffling the faux fur of her jacket. “Who’s your friend? You got the time, honey?”

To my surprise and delight, he stops to speak with her, and they chat about the box he’s holding. She’s clearly a sex worker who hustles the area consistently enough for them to have met before, but he’s not her client. He speaks to her in a neighborly way, even graces her with a bit of eye contact. “How’s Tiffany?” he asks. “Did she finish up that project?”

“Oh, you shoulda seen it – she built the whole White House outta little food boxes and toilet paper rolls, and then she used Marvin’s Lego guys for the people.” The woman’s face

changes from one of solicitation to a mother's pride. "Did it all by herself, too – some kids had their parents helpin' em."

"I keep telling you, she's gifted," Will says even as we edge away to continue down the street. "Tell the school to get her tested."

" 'Night, baby."

"Be safe," is his reply.

I expect him to explain the interaction, but he doesn't. Besides, we've arrived. Not to his home, but to the shuttered movie theater with its dark marquee. One of the few remaining "movie palaces" – vaudeville theaters that showcased the first moving pictures – I estimate it was built sometime in the mid to late 1920s. The darkened neon sign reads BIJOU. I can't be sure if it's small, or elegant, but the way Will looks up at it as we approach, eyes combing the two-storey facade, the marquee, and the vertical sign, he considers it a jewel. Producing a key, he unlocks the door next to the boarded up box-office window.

The interior is in ruins, a mess of peeling wallpaper and crumbling plaster. A recreation of old world splendor made of cheap materials now neglected. But I can see evidence of his efforts on one wall of the lobby where the molding has been restored. And the electrical works, bare bones as it is. He flips on a light switch and we ascend to the second floor. Part of the balcony has become a makeshift living area with a couch, chair, coffee table, and an old desk that serves as a workbench. It is here he leaves the box of sconces. Another small staircase leads to the projector room.

"You're living here?" I mask my delight as incredulity.

"Fun side effect of what Bev's serum does – apparently, ah, asbestos and lead paint can't really hurt you." Inside an old glass-walled popcorn machine he keeps a selection of liquor and glasses. He opens it with the squeak of a hinge and retrieves a bottle. "It's great, the sun can't get in there." He scoffs with a half-smile. "Perfect for you, I guess."

His scent is stronger than ever, overpowering the musty rot of the crumbling building. It's coming from him, assuredly, but also billowing down from the projection booth when the surprisingly functional HVAC system clicks on. He must sleep in the booth. Delightful. A vampire hunter haunting a derelict of splendor like a fiend, a windowless place safe from the sun and the outside world, clinging to the preservation of the past.

When I turn from the stairs, he's touching a record needle to a turntable. Scratchy blues howls from it; he adjusts the volume and motions to the chair and sofa arranged in front of the coffee table. I accept the old leather sofa's right-hand end. I expect him to take the chair, but he sits on the other side, setting a bottle of whiskey and his glass on the table, along with a heavy metal ashtray with a lion's head in the center. The letters molded inside say "MGM Studios."

"Has restoration been a lifelong hobby?" I watch him pour himself a drink and raise it to his lips, then light another cigarette. He should be more careful – one errant spark and an old building like this could ignite. I feel as if I could ignite.

He takes the whiskey as a shot, then pours another. “No. Started when I moved here for Daylight. I used to do a lot more, ah… fishing. Making flies. I had a little place in the country. Camping, that sort of thing.” Raises the glass to his lips again, drinking more slowly this time around. “I used to have dogs. Seven of ‘em.”

“Out at your country house?” He nods. “And you had to give them up to work for Mr. Crawford?”

He nods. Downs the shot, as if it will quench whatever he’s feeling on that particular sacrifice. “It wasn’t fair to them. I travel so much. I might… not come back. I trained them all really well – they’re all in homes w-with… good families.”

His eyes are captivating. Blue, with the strange ring of gold, like an Egyptian relic, gold and lapis. “And your family?” I ask, letting the question hang in the air like his cigarette smoke.

“Oh, is this the part where you psychoanalyze me? The vampire shrink – I still don’t get it. Are you gonna have bloodsucker clients, then?”

“Living for centuries affords the rare chance to learn as much as I can. I wanted to understand how the brain works, its influence on human behavior. And, yes, see how my existence fits into the web woven by nature.”

He drinks again, but leaves the cigarette to burn in the ashtray. “So you *weren’t* gonna follow that up with ‘tell me about your mother’? That’s some lazy psychiatry, Dr. Lecter. Low hanging fruit.”

“I suspect that fruit is on a high branch, very difficult to reach.” I watch him pour another drink. Dr. Katz’s serum must have an effect on his metabolism; beers at the bar and now a high-proof liquor, and he still seems bright-eyed and sharp.

“So’s my mother. I never knew her.” Drinks.

“The creature who made me what I am did so and left that very night,” I tell him. Perhaps he’ll see it as a similar abandonment.

“There’s something so foreign about family.” I can feel his focus loosen, his barriers trembling. “Like an ill-fitting suit. Never connected to the concept.” He leans back on the couch, glancing up at the ruined ceiling, glass in hand. Still wary, but probably not wary enough for his own good.

“You created a family for yourself,” I say, angling my legs more toward his and daring to rest my arm on the back of the sofa.

“I created a pack of strays,” he corrects me.

“And what has Jack Crawford created?”

“A team, he’d call it.” He brings the amber liquor to his lips again. “His version of family, where he’s proud papa and Bella’s the queen. The rest of them are brothers and sisters – fight like it, anyway.”

“And what does that make you?”

He polishes off another shot. “Black sheep. I make them all, uhm, nervous. I’m not like them, not anymore. But I’m not like you, either.”

“You are alone because you are unique.” Fearsome predator. Vulnerable and lonely. Starved for touch. Aching for connection.

“I’m as alone as you are,” he corrects me, setting down his empty glass with a wavering hand. Unsteady at last, it seems from intoxication, or is it something else just as heady and destabilizing? “You’re a vampire joining up with hunters. You’re not one of *them* anymore, and you’re sure as hell not one of us.”

“It seems we both occupy a liminal place. Patrol the borderlands.”

“Hmm.” He leans forward again, his hair falling into his eyes. He brushes it aside and lifts the cigarette lazily to his petal lips, then replaces it in the ashtray.

“Are you feeling the effects of alcohol?” I ask. Polite, clinical, observational.

He hums again. I risk moving closer on the sofa, under the pretext of examining the label on the bottle of whiskey. “A little, ah… social lubricant,” he says, reclining back and passing his hand over his forehead. “Liquid courage. What’re you gonna do, kill me?”

Closer; now, our knees touch. “I could, you know.”

“Oh please,” he laughs, closing his eyes and resting a hand on his slender middle. “I’m the fucking Daywalker. Not like your kind. A little sunlight and you’re a bonfire.”

“I’m sure you’d burn, under the correct circumstances,” I remind him. There is that delectable sweetness again, coming from his pores, hiding beneath all other scents. I am more sure than ever that it’s coming from his blood itself, and my fangs throb in my skull. “I could set you on fire. Decapitation would be equally effective for both of us.”

Will opens his gold-ringed eyes and looks up at me through thick lashes. “You’d have to catch me first,” he says. “I’ve been doing this awhile and, ah, I’m pretty good at it.”

“Do you enjoy it? Killing the UnDead?”

He gives me a wary look. “It feels… righteous,” he says.

“Does it bring you a measure of peace?”

He considers my words, touches his tongue to his lips as if tasting them. “A small measure. But yeah.” He smiles. It slices through me, sharper than the blade he must use to lop off the heads of my kindred. “No justice, no peace, they say.”

“Did you lose someone to a vampire? Is that where the righteousness comes from?”

He leans forward to pick up his almost-ash cigarette. “No. I worked in FBI criminal profiling with Jack. He recruited me.”

“Forgive me, but if he needed a soldier, you don’t seem the type.”

He gives me a mock salute, then stubs out his cigarette. “I was a good candidate for… *other* reasons. But I can’t show you every card in my hand now, can I, Doctor? In case this is all bullshit and I need to kill you.”

“You’re in no condition right now.” And he isn’t. And he knows it. And he’s done it deliberately. It’s a test, to be sure, but I can almost hear him say, *maybe I can’t save myself. And maybe that’s just fine.*

“Hard to believe I’m sitting here with a bloodsucker,” Will murmurs. He leans back on the couch again, shutting his eyes. Sweat glimmers on his forehead, dampening the curls near his hairline. “You’re so… *well behaved.* ”

Not for long. I reach out a white hand, and risk it all. How can I not, when he offers himself like this? I brush the hair from his damp forehead, and trace it with the lightest touch, feeling his radiating heat. He doesn’t leap to his feet, doesn’t slap my hand away, doesn’t grab the nearest weapon to try and decapitate me. I say, “You’re warm. Warmer than any human I’ve touched.”

“Daywalkers run hot – baseline 100.” Then, “You’re freezing,” Will murmurs, turning his head to look at me, doling out some of his precious eye contact. “Your hands are like ice. Is it cold in here?”

“No,” I say. “I’m always like this.”

His eyes show nothing but pure empathy. Perhaps this was his coveted power that caused Jack Crawford and Dr. Katz to transform him, to change him on a cellular level. If he can look at me with understanding and tenderness, even for a moment, then he can truly know his enemies. Find their point of view, see the world as they do. The empathy is a spade – used to sever at the root with a punishing blade, or, if he allowed himself, to till the earth and grow something nourishing and beautiful.

I could be his garden.

My realization is blinding, and there must be some evidence of it on my face. He studies me with a mixture of warmth and wariness. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

I can’t answer. I brush his hair back again, and warm the backs of my fingers against his cheek, soft and then delightfully textured with his stubbled beard.

“What’re you doing?”

“Touching you,” I say, as if it’s the simplest thing in the world. “I find your warmth very pleasant.”

Now Will moves his head out of reach, and sits up a straighter. Dismay crosses his fine features, as if he realizes we're past the point of no return.

He's fast, but I'm faster. Still, I have no interest in an altercation. So, while I catch his hand in mine with preternatural swiftness, I lean in slowly, giving him a chance to move out of the way. I place my other palm on his burning cheek, and kiss him on the mouth. A lovers' kiss. A sudden sweet moment of cold meeting warm, of gentle pressure. I taste smoke and whiskey and his fevered sweetness that must be the essence of the Daywalker serum that makes him burn so brightly.

Will pulls away. He wears surprise plainly on his face, though I can't tell if he's shocked at my actions or at himself for receiving the kiss without protest. And I'm surprised at myself, if I'm being honest – always something to strive for. And in the interest of full disclosure with myself, I must admit that what I really want is to know what Daywalker blood tastes like. I want my teeth in that graceful neck.

"If I were to do that again, what would you do?" I ask him. I am still holding one of his hands at the wrist. I release my hold just enough to telegraph his ability to pull away, should he choose to. He doesn't. My eyes drift down to this hand, these fingers that have held weapons, killed so exquisitely. They are callused from manual labor, but finely shaped, a sculptor's dream of tendon and bone. I fold it into both of my own, caressing up his wrist, spreading coolness on his fevered flesh.

Will stares at me, a cascade of tiny expressions flowing over his features, currents of confusion and fear and desire and anger and tenderness, the gold ring in his eyes shimmering.

"Nothing," he says.

I let go of his hand, one finger at a time, and shift closer to place a palm against the side of his flushed neck. I can feel his pulse hammering beneath and my fangs throb in my head in time with the desire swelling in me, pooling in my lap. I leave my hand there, should I need to grip him suddenly, hold him down, and use the opposite to caress the side of his face, my thumb skimming back over his ear and combing through his hair.

And Will, the Daywalker, the assassin feared by the UnDead the world over, rests his quivering hand on my thigh.

An invitation if there ever was one. I draw close and kiss him again, gently at first. He opens up to me, hungrily hesitant. His hand closes over my thigh, transforming touch to grope.

I am suddenly, dangerously ravenous. Will returns my kiss with just as much raw enthusiasm. We both have so much to lose.

Impossibly, I am in his arms, one of his gloriously warm hands on the back of my neck, the other gripping the lapel of my jacket to either pull me closer or hold me back. We share breath, lips ghosting past one another. He's made my heart move, expand and contract. It hasn't beat fully in so long I find it excruciating, passionately alien.

I should wait to see what he does next. My mind should race through several possible outcomes of this encounter and calculate which would bring me the most advantage. But I'm only *here* , locked in this sublime moment, a mortal trembling before an angel. *Be not afraid.*

The next thing I'm aware of is pushing him down on the sofa, stretching our bodies together, kissing him again and again, feeling the miracle that is his body, flushed and hot and inhumanly strong. He shoves his tongue in my mouth as he snarls his hand in my hair.

The inevitable happens. He cuts himself on my fangs and pulls back sharply, with a hiss. He puts his hand to his mouth. It comes away red on the fingertips.

"Forgive me," I say, though I have never regretted anything less in my centuries of life. Blood. His blood smells unlike any blood I've ever come in contact with. This is not mere food needed to sustain his unnatural existence. Its scent is utterly alive, both worldly and human and otherworldly, legendary. One who walked in the day.

"Bound to happen," Will says, eyes alight, a lovely flush brushing over his cheeks and blooming on his lips and neck. He lifts himself up on his elbow and kisses my lower lip gently, trying to be careful.

We've come too far for temperance. I bury my mouth against his again, tasting the blood from the puncture on his tongue. His breath is hot with it now.

Time and space mean nothing. For a moment, I am a mortal man again. I am alive. I know nothing of cold graves and yawning centuries. I am a man in love.

I want him to want me, to match my passion. A gentle kiss, another. And Will is hungry for it, starved for my touch, adorably arduous. Victory is sweet, and I oblige him. He curves his hand down my backside, grips it, slips his hand under the back of my jacket and claws at my shirt, trying to find flesh.

He wants me. Impossible. And yet. I slip my hand between his legs and tease his outline, reading it by touch. Hard for me, despite the danger, despite being created to destroy creatures of my ilk. Against his very nature. He tilts his head back, sighing out his yearning at my touch.

Is he offering?

The way his hips move against me encourages boldness. I lean in and trace my tongue and mouth down the side of Will's neck, kisses and hungry licks. A tiny press of my blunter teeth.

"No–!" comes the panicked syllable as Will seems to realize what is going to happen, what must happen.

I sink my fangs into his throat. Blood rushes into my mouth, flows down my chin, drips onto Will's shirt collar. Will makes a sound that could be pain, but sounds suspiciously like agonized ecstasy, a moan of amorous distress.

I lose myself in the taste. Pure sunlight. Hot, nourishing, filling me with a trembling pleasure that rolls through me like a particularly sweet sexual climax.

Impossibly, he is grinding himself against me, gripping my clothes and body as I drink. I manage to stop – an impressive feat – and look at him. A ruby droplet falls from my lips onto his, and his tongue steals out to lick it clean.

"I – should – kill you for this…"

The last vestiges of his conscience crumble when I open his jeans and yank them down around the curve of his ass, exposing his cock, swollen and insistent, rising beautifully from the soft curls of his pubic hair. Circumcised, as so many are in this century, beautifully textured, a size large enough to be aesthetically pleasing without seeming vulgar or insistent. I could fit it easily in my throat.

But my mouth is busy elsewhere. I spread the beads of moisture at the tip down his shaft and work him through my fist, his hips bucking up eagerly into my grasp. I slip my arm around his back and angle him upward, licking at the wound on his throat, pressing my tongue into the punctures in a way that must hurt. His body heats further, and the fevered sweetness envelops me, pouring into my body through his blood and cradling me in his true scent, baptizing me in his essence.

"Yes!" comes his frantic whisper. The density of his cock changes, swells further in my hand, his thighs tensing.

When he comes, sucking in a breath to moan – perhaps call out my name – I bite into his neck again, latching my mouth over the mangled wound and drinking, more and more and more. His hands lose their grip on my clothes, and his arms collapse helplessly, draping over the arm of the sofa. I can feel his heart pounding against my teeth, though it is slowing, slowing.

I manage to stop myself.

His eyes are closed, and his beautiful flush has gone pure and pale. I hold him close as my body twitches and burns all over for a solid minute, perhaps longer, during which the tiniest press of my hand against the furious bulge in my pants results in another kind of release that soaks into my clothing. I am breathing, panting, even.

I watch the wound on his neck heal itself, just as mine would, the layers of flesh webbing themselves back together. I have, however, left an ugly bruise where my teeth penetrated him. It excites me to know he is marked in this way.

Once I've recovered enough to be of use, I gently remove his jeans the rest of the way and fold them, leaving them on the coffee table next to the whiskey bottle. I tuck him back into his cheap cotton boxers and position him on the cushions with care, propping his head up with a throw pillow and turning him on his side. I find a blanket and tuck it around him.

I kiss his slackened lips and stroke his hair behind his ear. He's going to kill me for this. Or he's going to beg me for more.

I leave the ruined movie palace and disappear into moonlit Baltimore.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Jack Ganzer and Duncan Vizla team up for a mission and run across Jacob, who has access to something they need. Jack is injured in the line of duty.

Kentucky, January, 2021

Ray-Ray's Pub n' Grub still had their Christmas decorations up. *Things are slow to change around here,* Jacob thought. As soon as he came through the door, bringing the cold night air with him, every eye in the dingy little bar was fixed on him. *Yeah. Slow to change. They never forget.*

"This was a big mistake," he muttered under his breath as he slid onto a bar stool. He kept his Wildcats cap on, the bill pressed low to hide his face. No use. Everybody here knew who he was. Jacob Poulsen, terminal outsider, back in town for some ungodly reason.

Jacob hadn't had a chance here. Forever othered – first by the fact that his family had moved here from Denmark, of all places, when Jacob was ten, his peers just old enough to hold it against him from the get-go. And as if that wasn't bad enough…

So many eyes on him. Jacob rubbed his smooth chin ruefully as Merle came down to take his order. Take his order, or tell him to get the hell out.

It turned out to be the former. "Jacob. Home from school?"

"Yeah. Winter break."

"What'll it be?" Merle actively ignored the good ol' boys whispering and sniggering at the other end of the bar. Jacob recognized Scott Johnson, Rob Averly, and Kyle Howard immediately. A flush crept up his neck from the edge of his sheepskin jacket collar.

"Uh, beer and a bump."

Merle served him a Budweiser and a shot of bottom-shelf whiskey. Jacob took the shot immediately and drank half the beer. Shit, why had he decided to walk all the way down here? Sure, the house was lonely, quiet, the woods surrounding it unusually dark and unsettling, but wasn't that better than putting himself in this situation?

Jacob made himself as small as possible, folding his arms on the bar and hunching his shoulders as he polished off the beer. Merle served him another round without being asked.

Jacob forced himself to look at the game on TV, ignoring the guys who were clearly laughing at him, gossiping like church ladies at a potluck.

It wasn't ten minutes before Rob got tired of being ignored. "Hey Doughnut!" he shouted across the mostly-empty barroom. He made a dick-sucking gesture with his hand and stuck his tongue against the side of his mouth, his black mullet bobbing as he did so. The guys burst into donkey-bray laughs.

Fuck. He could have gone the rest of his life without being called that stupid nickname again. God, he'd been so excited with the thought of moving to America as a kid. He'd thought it was like the movies – he'd be living in New York or LA or out on the range with a horse of his own, roping cattle and sleeping under the stars. He'd had a horse, actually, but Buttercup hadn't made up for the fact that on his first day of school when he'd told the other kids he was Danish, their response was to brand him Doughnut for the rest of his life. Not enough to make up for always being different. Not enough to make up for how they treated him when they found out…

That was the worst part, come to think of it. After what happened with Caroline, maybe he'd been bi enough the whole time to pass for straight if he'd tried hard enough. He could have avoided…

Jacob chugged the rest of his beer, dropped some money on the bar, zipped up his coat, and left. He walked quickly away from the bar's parking lot, toward the long, dark road that led to his family's acres of land and their home. He prayed to a God that hadn't listened to him in years that they wouldn't follow him.

God wasn't listening. No surprise there. Rob, Scott, and Kyle followed him out into the chilly leaf-swept darkness, hurrying across the parking lot and onto the mouth of the gravel lane that wound up the hill and into the woods. "Hey Jake! Jacob, wait up! How long you in town, bro? Wanna hang out?"

Jacob kept his head down and walked faster, but his heart was a stone in his chest. Something terrible was about to happen.

He was right. As they rounded a bend, the bar now just out of sight, Rob and his friends broke into a run and caught up with Jacob. Rob took a handful of Jacob's coat and jerked him to a stop. "Well, well, well, if it isn't the town faggot home from his fancy college. Did you learn how to suck some nice Lexington dick while you were up there?"

Jacob was silent, brushing his dark hair out of his face. There was nothing he could say, no response cutting enough, nothing that would placate them, either. This was happening. If he was lucky, they wouldn't beat him too badly. He stood tall, and leveled each of them with what he hoped was an unfazed gaze.

"Why'd you come back, Doughnut? Nobody wants you here."

"Yeah, I mean, damn, we thought you went back to Doughnut Land where you belong."

“Say something, faggot.” Rob kicked the back of Jacob’s knee. He went down on one leg, then patiently got to his feet. “Did you lose your voice from giving all those blow jobs?”

Rob went to kick him again, and, God help him, he couldn’t just stand there and take it. Jacob wound back and socked Rob in his stupid grinning face. Rob stumbled back, and Scott and Kyle jumped him without hesitation. Within seconds, Jacob was in a ball on the ground, trying to protect his head as kicks rained down on him from all sides.

With a sudden roar and a burst of light, a red SUV sped across the icy gravel towards them, then ground to a halt. A man got out, a silhouette against the headlights. His assailants froze. Jacob squinted, blood from his split eyebrow running into his eye.

“Walk away.” The stranger’s voice was calm but taut with fury.

“What?” Kyle asked stupidly.

“Walk away. Leave.”

“Who the fuck are you?”

The stranger shook his head. “Last chance, guys. Leave him alone, and start walking.”

Rob snorted. “Who’re you, his boyfriend? Hey, fuck you, man, mind your own fucking business.”

“He’s what, 80 pounds soaking wet?” Scott snickered. “Hate to mess up that face, pretty boy.”

The stranger shrugged, and slipped off his jacket, setting it carefully on the hood of the car. “Okay. Guess we’re doing this.”

“Man, get lost! You want your ass kicked?” Kyle demanded, stepping over Jacob and raising his fists.

“Sure.” The stranger stepped forward as well.

“No.” Jacob’s voice felt thick and weak in his mouth. “I’m okay—”

Kyle looked at Scott, and nodded. They rushed forward, with all the grace of drunken good ol’ boys, and tried to grab the stranger by the arms, presumably so Rob could beat him more easily. The stranger shrugged them off like they were children. One shove of his arm and Kyle was sprawled several feet away in the ditch. Then he smashed his fist into Scott’s nose. It exploded in blood. Rob came running toward him, roaring obscenities. The stranger ducked his punch and elbowed him hard in the torso before cracking him across the cheekbones with two fast jabs.

It was over in a matter of seconds. Rob and his friends lay on the cold gravel, moaning, bleeding.

The stranger came over to Jacob and held out his hand. Jacob grasped him by the forearm and got woozily to his feet. A cloud cleared from the moon and Jacob could at last see his savior clearly. Immediately he felt the flush climb back up his neck and spread over his cheeks. This man was distractingly attractive. Dark brown curls framed his graceful cheekbones and handsome jaw. His eyes were a shade of blue ringed with dark gold in the center, and the mouth, those lips alone were enough to make his knees shake. He was a little shorter than Jacob, and while 80 pounds was a stretch, he was certainly more slender than anyone else involved in the altercation.

The stranger smiled, a boyish curve that was a stark contrast to the smear of blood on his cheek. “You may not get this chance again.” He turned and kicked Scott in the ribs, so hard he vomited. “Go ahead.”

Jacob laughed, half in shock, and drove his foot hard into Rob’s balls as he lay vulnerable on the frozen gravel. Rob yelped and curled into the fetal position. Jacob turned back to the stranger, and the edges of his vision feathered black. He tried to speak, but it took everything in him to stay standing.

“Whoa, okay. Easy there.” The stranger put an arm around his back. Jacob sagged against him, but while the man was slender, a couple inches shorter, he was easily able to shuffle Jacob toward the SUV and help him into the passenger’s seat. His closeness, the obvious hard texture of his muscles through his coat, his cologne made Jacob even dizzier. He slumped against the window after the stranger shut the door and climbed behind the wheel. “Which way’s home?”

Jacob pointed down the darkened gravel road, almost tunnel-like with the twisted branches of the old trees that lined it on either side. The stranger put the car into gear and drove on, leaving the men he’d beaten groaning on the ground in the red pool of his tail lights. Jacob felt impossibly drowsy in the warmth coming from the car’s heater, but whenever the vehicle bumped over something it jostled his ribs and his aching head, bringing him back to painful consciousness. The stranger turned up the long, winding drive that led to Jacob’s parents’ house, and pulled up in front of the four-stall garage. Fuzzily, Jacob thought, *how did he know to turn…*

But here he was, helping Jacob out and up to the front door. They passed beneath the second-story veranda and between the massive white plantation-style columns, the house a grand and bitter monument to the “American life” Jacob’s father and mother coveted enough to leave their homeland. Jacob’s dad would be furious with him for leaving the door unlocked, but at the moment, it was damn convenient. The stranger brought him inside to the massive foyer, their shoes violating the scarlet oriental rug.

The stranger paused to look at the portraits of severe-looking Danish relatives that lined the walls, and the original-to-the-house chandelier that hung above like the sword of Damocles. “Where to?” he asked, supporting his weight with an uncanny ease.

Jacob pointed to a pair of pocket doors to the left that led into the room his father always referred to as the “informal parlor.” It felt slightly less like a museum than the room across the hall from it, which was the “formal parlor” or some shit. “I just need to sit for a minute,” Jacob mumbled, and sank onto the large gray cottage-style sofa. He put his hand to his

eyebrow and then examined the redness smeared over his fingers. With any luck, he'd bleed on his mom's carefully-curated throw pillows.

The stranger stripped off his brown suede jacket and slung it over a chair. "Bathroom?"

"Uh, upstairs —" He shook his head, trying to clear his vision. "I'm — I'm okay. You don't have to—"

"I got it. Stay put." The stranger turned to go.

"What's your name?" Jacob winced at the volume of his own voice.

The stranger turned back, treating him to a ruinously beautiful profile. "Jack. You?"

"Jacob."

"I'll be back." The man — stranger, random angel, Jack — disappeared into the shadowy foyer.

Jacob's senses slowly came back to him as the aches and pains set in. Groaning, he managed to take off his jacket and shoes and use the sleeve of his brown crew neck to dot the blood from his chin and lip. Just when he felt good enough to stand, Jack returned with an armful of first aid, a couple of washcloths, and a bottle of water. He set down his load on the couch next to Jacob, and flipped on the closest lamp. Jacob reached for one of the washcloths, but Jack was quicker. "Stop trying to help. I told you, I got this. Hold still."

Jack sat on the ottoman across from him and sponged the blood off of his forehead, lips, and chin, then gently dried his face and applied bandages over his split eyebrow. Jacob's heart thundered in his chest, a rhythm like his father's thoroughbreds beat out on the race track. He focused on their portraits, which lined the room, instead of looking at Jack. Well, for a time. Before Jack had finished, Jacob had taken stock of his build (perfect) and tried to ascertain his dimensions under his jeans and the shirts he was wearing – a long-sleeved gray one beneath a dark blue tee. But now he was saying something.

"What?" Jacob stuttered through his swollen lower lip.

"I asked if you had any loose teeth."

Jacob felt carefully around his mouth. "No."

"I'll get some ice. Kitchen at the end of the hall?"

Jacob nodded. Jack left and came back again with a zip-lock bag of ice cubes and a bag of frozen peas. Jacob tucked the cubes against his bruised ribs and touched the peas delicately to his lips and forehead. He sat back, feeling clearer, though still confused and anxious, as Jack stood and went to the huge white fireplace and flipped the switch next to it. The flames sprang to life, filling the room with a warm glow and pleasant heat. Jacob watched him, still too stunned to think of anything to say. Jack did a slow loop around the room, looking at the decor, almost as if appraising the value of the curios and artwork. Jacob wondered idly if he

was a collector, an antiques dealer… or a burglar. Was this all a ruse to get into the house, when he could have just walked through the door?

Jack crossed to the antique sideboard and surveyed the crystal decanters and glasses with that same appraiser's eye. He pointed to the bourbon in its intricate bottle and glanced at Jacob with a raised eyebrow.

"Sure, go ahead," Jacob found himself saying. He quickly unscrewed the cap on the water and took several long drinks as Jack poured himself a hefty dram and returned to sit on the other end of the couch, facing him.

Jacob squeezed the rapidly-thawing bag of peas. "Do you need…?" He looked down at Jack's right hand as it gripped the delicate crystal glass. The knuckles were coated in blood, but there were no apparent injuries. They *should* have been split to hell.

"I'm fine. How are you feeling?"

"Better." Jacob watched him raise the glass of amber liquid to his lips, and studied the muscles of his neck as he swallowed. Why was his skin so perfect? Were his eyes gold around the center? What the fuck was going on? The world still had an air of complete fantasy. This was a dream. He purposely pressed his bruised ribs and sucked in his breath as the pain radiated through his bones.

"I, uh… how did you…" He struggled for the words. He hoped it was nervousness, not a concussion.

"I'd just pulled into the parking lot when you came out. I saw those guys follow you, and I heard what they were saying. I sat there for a few minutes trying to figure out what to do. Then I just…" He paused, sipped the whiskey. "I drove after you."

"Yeah, but… why?" Jacob cast his eyes down and adjusted the ice pack on his ribs.

"Well, first of all, it wasn't a fair fight. And I don't care much for homophobic pieces of shit, either. Can I get another?" He held up his empty glass

Jacob blinked, trying to catch his brain up to what Jack was saying. "No. I mean, yeah, go ahead, I don't care. My parents might, but… what the hell. They aren't here. And you just saved my life, so go for it." His face was hot.

"Thanks." Jack returned to the sideboard and refilled his glass.

"Can I—" Jacob pointed to the sideboard.

"Sure. Sorry, I should have offered." Jack refilled his glass as well and returned with both, sinking onto the couch. "So, this *isn't* your house?"

"Yeah. Well, no, not really. I grew up here. My parents live here, but they're on a cruise. I'm home for winter break from University of Kentucky."

“You’re local, and those guys still treated you like that?” Jack’s lips on the crystal glass were somehow erotic in the way the two surfaces met, hard and soft. “Friends of yours from high school, I take it?”

Jacob snorted. “Yeah, right.” He sighed. “I’ll never be local. Can’t you tell by the way I talk?”

“You don’t really have their accent, do you?”

“I was born in Denmark. My parents brought me over here when I was ten. Big dreams of racing horses.” He scoffed, taking another drink and coughing a little. It jostled his ribs and he groaned, taking a moment to let the pain pass before continuing.

“Your English is perfect.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Jacob sighed. “I guess they were my friends once. We all played football, American football. But…” He shrugged. “I’m not even supposed to be here. I had an apartment I was living in but I had to move out. My, um, my roommate and I had a fight. I mean, we just weren’t getting along.” He shook his head and ran a hand through his dark brown hair, combing it forward and then to the side. “Whatever. It doesn’t matter. I bet you have someplace to be – I’m fine, you don’t have to babysit me.”

“No,” Jack said. “I don’t have anywhere to be. Well, not until sunrise.”

“What happens at sunrise?”

Jack smiled with half his cupid’s bow mouth and danced his free hand’s fingers through the air. “I *disappear* . Like magic.” Jacob laughed, though gently, and so did Jack, though there was something sad in his smile, in the way he looked away and brushed a curl across his forehead after draining the last of the bourbon. “Do you need more ice?”

“No, but I’d take a couple of painkillers if you’re offering.”

“You’re drinking yours right now,” Jack teased, but went back upstairs to the master bath and brought him the medicine. Jacob took four ibuprofen and washed them down. Jack settled back in a couch cushion closer, and stared intently into Jacob’s eyes. It made his stomach flip. He felt justified in thinking Jack was an angel. He looked like a damn Renaissance painting. “Look up. Now look down.” Jacob followed the directions and Jack nodded. “I don’t think you have a concussion.”

“Yeah, I know what they feel like.” Jacob’s hands felt shaky. Was his voice shaking? Was the flush on his skin visible?

“Right. Football.” Jack put his arm over the back of the couch, resting one leg, bent, on the cushion, his body angled toward Jacob. “Why do your teammates treat you like that? They called you… oh, I get it. Danish. Doughnut.” He shook his head. “Is it all the… being European thing?”

“Um…” Jacob shifted uncomfortably, pressing the peas to his eye again for a few moments. “They think, uh, well, back in high school…” he trailed off. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“I’m sorry. I’m asking a lot of questions.” Jack ran a hand through his textured hair and Jacob tried not to look at the way the stubble on his jawline set off its pristine angles.

“W-well, I just, uh…” Jacob swallowed, and put the peas down. “Thank you,” he said earnestly, looking Jack in the eyes. “I didn’t say that yet. Thank you for helping me. I don’t know if they would have stopped.”

“You’re welcome.”

“You’re pretty good in a fight. Were you in the army or something?”

“I’ve been through some combat training. Not through the military. And I guess you could say I’ve seen some shit in my life.” He reached back behind his head to rub his own neck between the shoulderblades. Unfair, how attractive he was. “My dad ran a chop shop in LA. He taught me to fight as soon as I could walk. And my mom, well, she was… I guess you’d say a professional grifter. She taught me to fight dirty in case we ever got caught – y’know, go for the balls and the eyes, that kind of thing. You never know when you’re gonna get jumped.” He paused, and Jacob struggled to process everything he’d said, oscillating between fear and fascination. If this man was minutes away from kicking off a home invasion, Jacob had to admit he didn’t really mind. “Why’d you go to the bar anyway? You had to know those guys would be there.”

Jacob shook his head. The truth kept swimming around his tongue, but he was afraid of it. “I don’t know. I just couldn’t stay here alone any longer. This house is terrible when you’re alone. The woods and everything — it’s so quiet here, but I was also hearing… weird noises. I don’t know. Freaking myself out, I guess. I just couldn’t stand it. It was stupid.”

“Yeah, there’s definitely something out there. Or multiple somethings.” Jack motioned toward the large windows that opened out into the blackness of the nighttime woods. “Don’t worry. I can protect you.”

Jacob laughed genuinely for the first time that night. “I believe it.”

Jack looked at him for a long moment, a soft, sympathetic expression on his face. “You should get some rest. Go to bed. I’ll stay up in case those douchebags get a posse together and come after us.”

“Nobody’d come out here. They’re all too afraid of what my dad’ll do if they come onto our property. When you’re the richest man in the county, people don’t cross you.”

“So why did those guys come after you?” Damn. Jack was asking *again* . “If they’re afraid of your dad?”

“Nah. My dad doesn’t give a shit what happens to me and everybody knows it.”

“Why?”

Jacob stood up suddenly. His head swam, and he swayed on his feet for a moment. Jack was at his side in a second, a hand on his elbow to steady him. “Thanks,” Jacob said quickly. “I’m good. But yeah. I am tired. I should probably…” he motioned back toward the front hall and the staircase. “There are two guest rooms upstairs. If you want to stay.” Did he really just say that? Jacob was shocked at his own naive words.

“Thanks.” Jack poured himself another drink. “Lead the way.”

Jacob took him up the large curving staircase and down the hall leading to the east wing bedrooms. His was the last door on the left. Well, the room that used to be his. As soon as he’d moved out, his parents had gutted it and replaced everything with bulky period-accurate furniture and Victorian wallpaper. The four-poster bed with the canopy was like something from the set of *Gone with the Wind* . “This is me. Make yourself comfortable and everything. Will I see you in the morning, or are you really going to disappear?”

Jack chuckled softly. “Yeah. Unfortunately. I’ll be gone. This will all be nothing but a bad dream.”

“It’s not all bad.” Oh fuck, had he actually said that? Jacob turned and fled into the bedroom that had once been his, kicking off his shoes and folding down the comforter on the bed.

Jack leaned on the doorframe, watching him, every now and then sipping from the liquor glass. Backlit by the hall light, his slender hips a graceful silhouette. “I think I understand you.”

“What?” Jacob froze, holding a pillow in one hand.

“I understand why you’re wary. Careful. Evasive, actually. Growing up here, in this town, with certain expectations. Football, Kentucky, all of it. You probably left here thinking if you got far enough away, you could be free.”

Jacob licked his bottom lip. “I, um, I don’t—” He silenced himself as Jack held up a hand.

“I just want you to know that you don’t have to be afraid of me. I know that’s weird, coming from a total stranger, but what I’m saying is, part of the reason I stepped in tonight is because I felt like I *needed* to protect you.” A pause. Jack traced his finger over the rim of the crystal. “Because I think the two of us have a lot in common. Do you get what I’m saying, or do I need to spell it out?”

Jacob was so relieved that he had to sit down, and did so at the end of the bed. He could feel a thousand knots coming undone inside of him, and a slow burn that moved from the hot flesh of his neck down to his navel. “I understand,” he managed to say.

Jack crossed the room toward him, finishing the drink. He set the glass on the bedside table, then came to stand in front of Jacob. “Good.” Gingerly, he reached out to pull Jacob to his feet and cradle his hips in his hands, looking at him with a gentle eyes that were further softened by the spreading ink of pupil. “Is this okay? Is it what you want?”

Jacob couldn't respond, but he managed to nod. He felt his whole body trembling as Jack came closer still, sliding a hand up his chest to cup the side of his face, fingers playing against his sharp cheekbone. Gently, mindful of Jacob's split lip, he brought their mouths together. Jacob grabbed him with a sudden, all consuming passion, his entire body burning for Jack's warm touch. Jack pulled back gently. "Relax," he whispered, trailing his knuckles down Jacob's neck and playing with his collar. "It's hours until sunrise."

He ran his fingers along the hem of Jacob's shirt, then lifted it slowly. Jacob grunted in pain as Jack slid the garment off, revealing the bruises that were beginning to form. "I'm sorry I didn't get there sooner," Jack murmured. With the lightest touch, he guided Jacob back onto the bed. Jacob shifted until his back was against the pillows. Jack paused to switch on the soft lamp at the bedside to examine the damage. He noted a long scar that ran from the top of Jacob's shoulder down to his collarbone. "What happened here?"

"Surgery. I messed up some ligaments playing football." He licked his lips, sweat prickling his forehead as Jack reached out to touch it with cool fingertips. "Do you have any? Scars, I mean?"

Jack lifted his blue tee shirt hem and slipped it off, then the gray long-sleeve thermal he wore under it. "Not as nice as yours."

Jacob's eyes devoured sight of his smooth chest, his dewy skin and blushed nipples, the topography of lean muscle, the flat plane of his belly and the remarkable cut of his Adonis belt. "What's this?" He brushed a shaky thumb over a small tattoo of what looked like a droop-winged butterfly or a moth with dual-toned wings, orange near the body and black at the edges. The image wrapped around his hip bone.

Jack smiled, but he looked sad in a way Jacob couldn't put his finger on. "It's a Kamehameha butterfly. State insect of Hawaii. Lived there for a while with my mom when I was, oh… I think I was eleven or twelve. She met a guy who was going to start a restaurant. She helped him raise all the start-up money and then…" Jack sighed. "One night she woke me up and said we had to leave. She took the money and we never went back. I liked it there. I liked Kai, the chef who was starting the restaurant. Probably a little too much – it was a whole bisexual awakening thing." He chuckled, but then sobered, reaching out to touch Jacob's scar again. "I didn't know it was a con. I thought Hawaii was gonna be home, and we were gonna be a family."

"I'm sorry," Jacob said, reaching out to touch in return.

"Here I go again, telling you my sad story," Jack scoffed, his face brightening, tucking the pain away for later. Jacob recognized it because he was a master of it himself. He didn't have long to ruminate on it, because now Jack was on top of him, straddling his hips, kissing the scar, trailing his tongue up to the hollow of Jacob's throat. Jacob had to force himself to stay relaxed, as he'd been instructed. He was powerless, however, to stop his hands from where they roamed over Jack's hard abs, the taut muscles of his back, his *perfect* ass.

"Too bad I have to leave in the morning. I could've made breakfast. I can make an apple tart that'll ruin all other desserts for you for the rest of your life." Jack kissed his mouth again, so whiskey-sweet, so unhurried, and undid the button of Jacob's jeans. He broke their mouths

apart just long enough to peel Jacob's pants and boxers off, leaving him naked on the big ridiculous antique bed. It seemed to happen in a blink that Jack was just as naked beside him, skin to skin, and Jacob was overwhelmed entirely by his scent. There was that incredible cologne, yes, but something beneath it that smelled like what the color amber looked like, even though that didn't make sense. Smoke. Cedar, maybe.

"Someday I'll have my own restaurant," Jack said with a wistful smile. "And you can come try it out. On the house, if you leave us a good review online."

Jacob snorted a laugh as he leaned in and kissed him again. He wondered if the apple tart tasted as good as Jack's mouth. Doubtful.

They tangled together on the silky bedspread. Jacob felt himself losing control, even though Jack had suggested going slowly. Against the ache of his ribs and though his sore body protested, he rolled over on top of Jack and twined their legs together, his kisses and caresses becoming more arduous, desperate in their passion, possessive. When Jack reached between his legs and stroked his cock with a practiced hand, he climaxed almost instantly, with such force he was left trembling.

"Oh, shit," he panted, rolling onto his back and putting his hand over his eyes for a moment. "Sorry — it's been awhile—"

Jack sat up on one elbow and traced his collarbone with a satisfied smile. "Don't worry about it." He leaned over and kissed him, long and slow. They lay face to face, Jacob still breathing hard from his climax.

"It's been awhile," Jacob repeated. "I haven't… uhm… well, and I haven't felt like…"

"Shh…" Jack ran his thumb over Jacob's nipple, then traced it down to his hip, combing through his chest hair. "Hey. Tell me the whole story now. Now that you know you can trust me."

Jacob spoke. It was like a dam had broken open. Everything just poured out in an uncontrollable torrent. "In high school we went to a football camp in Lexington. There were a bunch of players from all over the state. We had an odd number of guys on my team, and we drew straws to see who wouldn't have a roommate they knew. I got the short straw, so I had to bunk with a guy from another team in the dorm while everyone else got to stay with their friends. So, this guy… Chris… was my roommate. We actually hit it off really well. We started eating all our meals together and hanging out at the end of the day and stuff."

He paused. Jack stroked his hair, caressed his throat. Jacob closed his eyes a moment to gather threads of trust and courage. "I don't know how the other guys found out." His voice was a thick murmur, monotone and yet touched by tears. "We thought we were hiding it, but I guess we weren't smart about it. Coach sent me home early and everyone knew. *Everyone* . I did online school my senior year. Didn't even go to graduation. I managed to convince my parents that it was all a misunderstanding and some guys on my team who wanted to play my position made it up to get on the first string."

"And your roommate in Lexington? He's your boyfriend?"

“Not anymore.” Jacob felt his throat get tight, but forced it open with a deep breath. “I really fucked up.”

“What happened?”

Jacob sighed, rubbing his mouth. “We threw a New Year’s Eve party, and my boyfriend’s brother Tom and his girlfriend Caroline were there. I mean, we were drinking and all, but… Caroline and I both ended up in the bathroom somehow and we were just talking and then … *kissed* .” He winced, looking away. “I had a couple of girlfriends in high school but it never really did anything for me, you know? But with her, it was different. I couldn’t get her out of my head. And she… wanted me, too, and we…” He sighed. “We cheated. And a week ago my boyfriend found out and he threw me out, not that I blame him. I can’t get into the dorm until the new semester starts and everyone I could stay with is friends with *him* . It’s a small circle. It’s still Kentucky, y’know?” He gestured to the immaculate antiques around them. “I didn’t want to make trouble for Caroline either. So I had to come home. I’ve been here for a couple of weeks already and I just couldn’t stand spending another night here alone. That’s why I went to Ray-Ray’s, which I admit was… stupid.”

“Yeah, it kinda was,” Jack said through a half-smile. “But I understand why you did it. This house is… awful. I can’t wait to break this ugly old bed fucking you.”

Jacob laughed in genuine surprise and nervousness and Jack joined him. “Well, I’m pretty sure I already ruined this comforter.”

Jack’s face went serious in a sudden shift. “But not unless you want to.” He touched the swollen place over Jacob’s eyebrow with the lightest brush of his finger then rested a palm on his chest. “It’s okay, you know. People don’t get it – they think you’re either gay or straight, and they don’t like bisexuals because they don’t fit into neat little categories. Unless it’s in porn, then they can’t get enough.”

“It was like a test. I needed to know if I really was. I don’t know. It was stupid. People got hurt.”

“You’re not a bad person, Jacob.”

“Yes, I am. It’s all my fault.”

Jack leaned over and grabbed a kleenex from the box next to the bed and handed it to him. Jacob didn’t realize he’d teared up, and dabbed at his eyes a second before using the tissue to clean up some of the splatter from earlier that still rested below his navel.

“When my mom woke me up to run that night in Hawaii, taking all of Kai’s money, you know what she said to me?” Jack lowered his long lashes for a reluctant moment. “She said, ‘This is who we are. This is what we do, honey. If Kai really knew us he wouldn’t love us.’ I told her I wasn’t going, that I wanted to stay with Kai and I didn’t care, and she said, ‘Make a choice. Him or me. But when he sees who you really are he won’t want you, and then you’ll be on your own.’ So I went with her.

“I’ve stolen – money, cars, guns, drugs – and I know people have gotten hurt because of what I took. Cartels don’t care if you got robbed – they still want their money. I was born into it. It’s all I knew how to do until…” he sighed. “I’m turning my life around,” was how he chose to finish. “And if I can change and try to make things better, so can you. You just have to decide not to waltz around messing up everyone’s lives and getting away with it because you’re pretty.” He smirked, brushing Jacob’s hair off his forehead. “Bet you’d get away with it, too – it’s hard to stay mad at someone as sexy as you.”

Jacob flushed, and Jack laughed, a teasing little sound. It made Jacob feel like something hard and flinty inside him softened, beginning to dissolve, like ice melting. This time he couldn’t stop the tears from pricking his dark eyes.

Jack was serious again.“Tell me you understand.”

Jacob nodded, dragging the heel of his hand across his cheek.

“Say it.”

He took a shaky breath. “I’m not a *horrible* person.”

“It’ll take you time to believe it. But eventually you’ll come back to this moment and think, ‘he was right’. If I can change, so can you.”

Jacob nodded and breathed deeply for a few moments.

“Let me get you a drink.” Jack got up and went down to the kitchen, and returned with a glass of water. As he crossed the room, the open curtains allowed the cold moonlight to ripple over his body, bringing out every cut and taut place, the shadows making him even more beautiful. Jacob drank the water and set the glass to the side. Jack paused to look out the window at something, likely the black woods, or the moon. Then he slid back on the bed next to Jacob and sat up on his elbow to lean over him. They kissed gently at first, and then with more force, Jack stroking down from his navel and caressing his twitching cock with ghost-soft fingers. “Now, let’s see, where was I? Oh, yeah. We were discussing the fate of the bed.” He cupped Jacob’s ass with a reverent hand. “Is this what you want?”

Jacob buried his mouth on Jack’s and reached between his legs to grope him. “Does this answer your question? And by all means, break the bed.”

Jack grinned and tongued his throat up to the base of his chin. “Thank God. Fighting always makes me horny.”

Jacob breathed laughter into Jack’s ear as he kissed his neck again and tugged his hair playfully. He brushed his fingertips along Jacob’s inner thighs, first one, then the other, then palmed his reawakened cock. They twined together, hands roaming, alternating between caresses and forceful groping. Jack had the most perfect ass Jacob had ever seen on a man or a woman and he couldn’t keep his hands off of it. He only let go when Jack rolled him on his back and slid down between his legs, licking and nuzzling against his inner thighs, again repeating his tease of one side and then the other before drawing his cock in.

Jacob had, in fact, had some experiences with “nice Lexington dick” over his time at the university, and some accommodating Lexington mouths, but none held a candle to Jack. In the soft lamplight he seemed even more otherworldly now; appearing like a rebel angel on the cold winter road and saving him had been a miracle enough. But the blessed salvation of the best blowjob Jacob had ever experienced, from a man or a woman, was literally the second coming.

And he *swallowed.* What plane of heaven was this guy from?

Jacob melted back against the pillows, breathing hard, pushing his hair off his forehead as Jack wiped his shiny lips and settled in next to him. Jacob lay his head on Jack’s chest, delighting in his clean-boy scent and the softness of his skin while Jack stroked his hair. Before he knew it, he’d almost fallen asleep in that quiet place of satisfied safety. Jacob started and sat up, blinking furiously. “Sorry. Let me…” He scooted down, palming Jack’s cock, which needed some attention to return to its previous dimensions. Grower, not a shower, but Jacob certainly appreciated how well maintained his pubes were – not that he was real hairy to begin with–

“No, no, just relax. You got a busted lip.”

“Well, I could…”

“Shh,” Jack chided. “You’re exhausted. Just go to sleep.”

“In the morning, I’ll…”

“I know you would,” Jack said, kissing him.

“I will,” Jacob promised. “I definitely will, I’m just…”

And with that, he slept.

“Jack.”

Jack’s dream ruffled its feathers like a startled bird. He didn’t want to wake up. If this was a dream, lying in bed with a handsome boy with devastating cheekbones, then if he woke up, he’d be in Paris with Sarah, being *kept*...

“Jack.”

He opened his eyes. Over the rounded muscle of Jacob’s shoulder, he saw Duncan Vizla standing at the edge of the bed, wearing black from head to toe, his usual uniform of tactical-grade pants, a turtleneck, and a long black coat.

Jack blinked a few times as the Black Kaiser glowered at him with his two-toned gaze. His original, the right eye, was dark chocolate brown, and the other, which had at one point been in the skull of a vampire, was a honey-amber that reflected light like a cat’s. He’d plucked it from an UnDead before cutting off its head and burning it on one of his Daylight missions. Then he’d brought it back to Dr. Katz in an empty box of cigarettes. She’d been repulsed at

first, but eventually agreed to try and reattach it into Duncan's socket. A little more serum, and voilà – Duncan had his sight back. With his vampire eye, he could see in the dark. Just one more reason why he was the scariest motherfucker working for Daylight Inc. This was their first mission together, and Vizla had made it clear he wasn't happy about working with a partner, much less Jack Ganzer.

Jack eased his arm from around Jacob's warm midsection and slid away, tucking the blankets back in his wake. Jacob lay immobile, his fist under his chin, face slackened, emitting the tiniest snores. Jack dressed hurriedly as Duncan stared at the figure in the bed, trying to gauge, Jack thought, how deeply he slept.

"I put Ambien in his water," Jack whispered. He buttoned his jeans. "He'll be out for hours."

Vizla grunted, which seemed to be his preferred method of communication.

Jack tied his boots and they crept out into the hall and down to the softly-lit kitchen. Jack pulled a pad of paper off of the refrigerator. The heading read "Shoppin' List" and was decorated with rustic chickens. He found a pen and leaned over the counter to write. Duncan loomed behind him to read over his shoulder, casting a shadow that Jack swore he could feel like a physical weight.

"He saw your face. You told him your name."

"No, I didn't," Jack argued.

"He was fucking moaning it."

Jack sighed roughly, shaking his head. "Lots of guys are named Jack. Is he gonna be safe here, after all this goes down?"

"As long as we don't leave witnesses."

"They'll know it was us, anyway. You're not exactly *subtle* ." Jack paused writing. "I assume you saw what happened to Jacob tonight. Those guys came after him because he's gay. Or bi, I guess, considering the girl in the bathroom…"

Duncan just stared at him with his uncanny eyes. "Anyway," Jack said, "I couldn't sit there and watch that happen."

"The same way you can't disappear without leaving a note." Duncan looked at the notepad again. "Bleeding heart." It might have been meant to be said with contempt, but the tone didn't quite land. Jack ignored him and continued writing the sentence *things will get better.* He signed it, and took it back to the room with the sofa and the crystal decanters to place the note carefully on Jacob's jacket where he'd be sure to find it when he came looking for his phone.

Jack stood and turned to Duncan. "I know what you're thinking. We needed to get inside the house. We didn't know Jacob was home for the break, and I should have just let those guys

kick his ass and leave him in a ditch, because then we could have just walked in, no problem."

Duncan grunted. Jack glowered at him, bottom lip sneaking out. "Catch more flies with honey than vinegar. And… y'know what, I'm *not sorry* I kicked a bunch of bigots' asses. I know we're not supposed to beat up on humans but I don't give a shit."

"Supposed to be quiet." Duncan opened up his inner coat pocket and slipped out a pack of cigarettes. "Not draw attention."

Jack scoffed dismissively, and opened his mouth to say something, but Vizla suddenly had him by the arms, and pushed him back swiftly into the wall with a soft thud. A curio cabinet rattled dangerously as the Black Kaiser easily forced Jack's wrists against the wallpaper at shoulder height. They'd both gotten the same serum initially, but the extra doses needed for the eye surgery, coupled with Duncan outweighing him by fifty, sixty pounds, maybe more, made it no contest.

"Vizla—!" His name was a sharp exhale as the breath was forced out of his lungs. "What the fuck?" He tried to wiggle free, push back. His wrists came away from the wall an inch, trembling with exertion, before Duncan forced them back down. The Black Kaiser was granite-strong, as always. What was more alarming was the warmth that spread up from Jack's groin and the shiver that snaked through his body.

"Taking a page out of Will Graham's book?" Duncan rasped, close to his face, his breath smoky and dangerous.

"What?" Jack's mouth felt numb and stupid.

"Fucking everything in sight to get close to the target. That's his MO."

Anger flared, unfurling in his gut like a flag in the breeze, snapping in the wind. "I'm *nothing* like Will Graham," he snarled.

"Maybe he's taking a page out of yours." Duncan released him suddenly and stepped back. It always threw Jack for a loop, how fast he could move despite his size, his coat rippling in the breeze of his movements.

Jack stepped unsteadily away from the wall, rubbing his wrists. "What the fuck's that supposed to mean?"

Vizla finally lit the cigarette behind his ear he'd somehow tucked there. Smoke curled up from the ceiling and the cherry glowed like a tiny piece of hell stoked by his breath. He didn't answer.

"Are you talking about Paris?"

Again, Vizla didn't respond, just raised the cigarette to his lips between two long, scarred fingers, the smoke tickling his mustache. *His stupid fucking mustache* , Jack thought. "You are talking about Paris," he answered for himself. "You're talking about Sarah."

“Your sugar mommy.”

“What the *fuck* is wrong with you?” Jack demanded, his body taut from head to toe. He was trembling with fury and hated that it was no doubt visible to the Kaiser’s trained eyes, both human and vampire. “I was supposed to get us into the house, and I got us into the house. The only evidence we were ever here is a posse of good ol’ boys with broken noses who’ll probably be too ashamed to tell anyone they got their asses kicked by one guy. Things are *fine* as of right now, anyway, because the longer we’re fucking standing here–”

Vizla closed the space between them in a preternatural blink that left Jack disoriented, the assassin wrapping a hand around the collar of his shirt. Jack instinctively gripped his wrist, then glared up at him. There was a thorny silence that ended when Duncan said,“Your bag’s by the front door. Get back on schedule.”

With that, he released Jack’s shirt. Jack, fuming, retrieved the large black duffle bag from the foyer and slipped it over his shoulder.

Jacob’s family’s house was large, but it didn’t take them long to find the cellar door. The steps leading down were sturdy but narrow. Duncan’s broad shoulders forced him to turn sideways. The basement was unfinished, the walls made of the exposed stone of the foundations, the floors painted concrete. They found the door to the tunnel behind a metal shelving unit loaded with Christmas decorations. As they slid it out of the way, a gaudy ceramic Santa fell to the floor and shattered. Duncan kicked the pieces out of his way as they repositioned the shelves.

“Figures,” Jack muttered. “You’re a fucking grinch.”

“The fuck is a grinch?” Duncan rumbled, stubbing out his cigarette but retrieving the butt. Evidence.

Jack sighed. “Never mind, let’s just get this over with,” he snapped, unzipping the duffel bag. He removed and strapped on his tactical gear as Duncan came up with a crowbar and pried the ancient door open. It gave way with a groan and a cloud of dust. Duncan bent down and picked up a mason jar from the floor just beyond the threshold.

“Any moonshine left in there?” Jack snarked, adjusting his bulletproof vest. “I could use a drink. Kill some brain cells so you’d be in better company.”

Duncan didn’t respond, instead setting the mason jar aside and getting his assault rifle out of the bag, loading it with practiced ease while Jack looped a shark-mail neck wrap around his throat and buckled it. Beverly had designed it as a way to repel fangs. Jack always wore his, and a kevlar vest, but Duncan never did, which Jack assumed was some kind of stupid flex. Or maybe he really didn’t need it, which was a scary thought. Jack felt a creeping flush on his face as Duncan stared at him, inhumanly motionless, watching as Jack hurried to strap on his leg holsters and load his pistol, then the flat LED light that hung on his vest to keep his hands free. At last, he slipped his knife in its sheath and attached the night vision sight onto the rifle. He checked his watch. “Right on time, see?”

Duncan didn't respond. He peered into the gaping blackness of the moonshine tunnel. "I'll go first."

"You can see better anyway."

And by better, Jack meant at all. It didn't take long for the tunnel to become pitch black, and it was too risky to use a light. Jack raised the rifle and turned on the night vision scope, which was his only chance to see anything. However, his senses were sharp enough to pick up the nearly-silent traces of Duncan's movement, his scent cutting through the musty air – cigarettes and that awful Speed Stick deodorant he wore that reminded Jack permanently of the old timers that hung around his dad's garage back in the day.

If Will had been on this job, Jack thought, even with his vision impaired, his sixth sense or whatever it was would have compensated, the radar in his head. He'd said vampires felt frigid and nauseating in his mind. Not Hannibal Lecter, though, of course. Ugh, not that Jack wanted to think about Will right now, about how he walked around Daylight like he was in charge instead of the Crawfords, saying unapologetically rude shit that was extra rude because it was true. Jack would never forget being read by Will's eyes and scorched by his sarcasm, thumbed open like an old magazine at the dentist's office, every vulnerability revealed as Will deployed his weaponized empathy.

They came to a part of the tunnel that was partially caved in. Duncan somehow picked his way around the debris in complete silence and squeezed in between the rubble and the intact wall on the other side. Through the scope, Jack saw Duncan turn and offer him a ghostly white hand, his eyes glowing eerily, one brighter than the other. Jack didn't want to take it, but didn't feel he had a choice. He tucked the rifle closer to his body and grabbed on, concentrating on squeezing past the pile of rubble without making a sound. It was difficult to do wearing the tactical vest; maybe that's why Vizla had turned it down. When he finally emerged on the other side, he could have sworn Duncan gave his hand a little squeeze before letting go.

At last, they came to the door on the other end. Jack expected it to be barred shut, that they were going to have to break it open, but it was practically hanging off its hinges. Duncan eased it open with aching slowness. Jack looked through the scope as he did so, trying to understand the dimensions of the room beyond. It was a cellar, with stone walls and a dirt floor. Crates and rotted furniture were piled in the corners. Duncan stepped into the cellar of the old house that had once held the largest illegal distillery in Kentucky, liquor that had been smuggled down to the home where Jacob's family now lived for distribution. The Prohibition-Era tunnels had been documented at some point, and Bella had unearthed them when prepping for the mission. Perfect for an ambush.

Jack followed Duncan, scanning with the scope. There were four lumps on the floor, which turned out to be young vampires, creatures that had been human days or weeks ago, asleep on a few old mattresses. That was the purpose of this place, to house and train new bloodsuckers, meant to serve Mason Verger's interests as he attempted to grow his UnDead empire even as Daylight cut it down, a hydra of bloodsucking fiends.

Perhaps they'd become vampires of their own free will, or perhaps they'd been forced. Either way, the end would be the same.

Jack positioned himself above one and slung the rifle back softly on its strap, freeing his hands. He pulled his knife from the sheath, and hoped he could strike true. The room was almost completely black, but if he squinted, he could just make out his target. After a few moments, Duncan's whisper came through the darkness. "Now."

Jack plunged the knife down into the sleeping vampire's throat, and swept it to the side, nearly severing the head. The creature's life flowed out of its neck and soaked into the mattress beneath. Jack hacked at the remaining flesh of the neck until he was able to pull the head free by its hair. Across the dank cellar, he heard the rending sound of muscle and tendons and the splintering of bone as Duncan used his bare hands to twist the head off of another.

The gurgling and the smell of blood alerted the other two, but they were groggy at the prospect of the coming dawn. Duncan ripped the head free of his second target as Jack clamped a hand over his mark's mouth and decapitated her with three swift strokes of his insanely sharp knife.

"Clear," Vizla whispered again. Jack finally switched on the light attached to his vest. The Black Kaiser lit up before him, splattered with blood, two-toned eyes alight.

Jack wiped his knife on his pants, sheathed it, and checked his watch. "Sun's up," he mouthed.

Duncan nodded in response. They crept up the rickety wooden stairs that led up to the main floor, and eased the door open with a gentle squeak of hinges. The house was a wreck. The wallpaper hung from the walls in curled strips and the windows were boarded up. Still, Jack could see between the slats that it was growing lighter outside.

The front door was only a few steps away, and Duncan went there, unlocking the various bolts and chains with quick, silent hands. He opened the door and glanced out, no doubt looking for the nearby barn that also needed to be cleared of vampires. He paused, glancing back at Jack.

"What?"

Duncan leaned in close, his smoky breath tickling Jack's ear. "Watch your corners," he whispered. "You always forget to watch your fucking corners."

"No I d–" Jack's words were stifled by the Kaiser's hand gripping his jaw, palm over his mouth. Jack glared at him over the meat of his thick, powerful hand. A long moment passed, long enough for Jack's mind to court several questions before Duncan let go and slipped through the front door, lighting a cigarette as he headed for the barn.

Jack took a breath and wiped sweat from his forehead, turning back to the task at hand. Systematically, he moved through the house, the rifle on his shoulder, set to auto fire, pointing the muzzle around corners and easing open doors. He checked his corners, and felt the echo of Duncan's hand on his face.

He pushed open the door to what must have once been a cedar closet to keep fine clothing fresh. Now, it was keeping a vampire fresh as he hid from the daylight. But he woke as the door opened and ambient sunlight from the hallway fell over him. He snarled and sprang to life from his dirty sleeping bag on the floor, and bared his fangs at Jack.

Jack opened up the AR-15. Though the vampire kept running at him for a couple of more steps, several bullets found their way into his skull. He thudded to the floor and Jack separated the head from the body with a hard kick. Another bloodsucker came flying out into the hallway, alerted by the gunfire. He paused at the door to the closet, took one look at Jack, and fled. Jack stepped out into the hall after him and opened fire, cutting him down at the legs. “No, no, no—” the creature begged. Jack silenced him with a shot to the head, and used his knife to finish the decapitation.

He paused, taking cover on the other side of the ancient cast-iron stove in the dilapidated kitchen, and reloaded. He listened for movement. There was nothing, but he could hear the sharp report of gunfire coming from the barn where Vizla was cleaning house. Jack cleared the first floor, leaving boot prints in the puddles of blood, and then slowly ascended the creaking stairs to the second storey. There was only one door up here that was shut, the others hanging askew, sagging on their hinges.

Gently, heart pounding in his ears, Jack eased the door open, and nosed the gun around, looking for his next target. She found him, leaping down from the top of an armoire just inside the door, dragging him deeper into the shadowy bedroom. She slammed the door shut and turned the bolt. He could only see her with the light attached to his vest. The windows of the bedroom had been boarded and plastered shut to keep the light out. She stood before him, a girl who might have once been pretty but now looked like a monster wearing expensive athleticwear. She was mistress here, he was sure of it, the demon mother of Verger’s soldiers, the creator of the rest of the creatures he’d just dispatched. She was old, and fast, fast enough to snatch his rifle and hurl it against the wall where it came apart in several pieces.

Jack pulled his sidearm and unloaded it at her. She strafed quickly, zig-zagging as she rushed him, and he missed several shots, though he did manage to tag her a few times in the extremities. Didn’t slow her down. She caught him by his wrist and slammed him into the wall hard enough that he dropped the weapon. Oh yeah, she was strong. But he knew how to fight, and those hours and hours of training with Vizla, always scowling in silent disapproval beneath his mustache, or Will, with his shitty comments about how he always saw Jack’s next move coming – it was all about to pay off. The vampire leaned, open-mouthed, and he head-butted her in the face, slashing her fangs through her lip on one side. She roared in pain and let go of his wrist, giving him the opportunity to kick her in the gut, driving her away.

Still, speed was on her side. She grabbed him by the vest and threw him to the ground, jumping on top of him. Her teeth scraped against the shark mail on his neck and she snarled in disappointment, pulling back to tug at the wrap, trying to yank it free. Jack groped for his knife and slashed it across her throat. She pulled back just in time to only receive a superficial injury, but her imbalance allowed him to roll out from under her and get to his feet, striking out again. She deflected the knife with her forearm, but the blade dug deep, and she howled.

Enraged, she grabbed him again, this time slamming him into the wall. Plaster dust wafted into his hair as he dug the knife into her shoulder. It didn't seem to bother her much as she lifted him off his feet again and bashed him into the wall. Sharp pain sliced across the back of his head. But the wall behind him was giving way. Because it wasn't a wall. It was one of the plastered up windows.

Jack fought the impending darkness of his head injury. He raised the knife and stabbed it into her back again. Yowling like a mountain cat, she grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand and the knife free, then dragged him down, forcing him to plunge the blade into his own thigh. Jack yelped out an agonized cry. With his last strength, he took a hold of her throat and the wrist of her knife hand, and hurled himself backward.

Jack and his assailant crashed through the weathered boards and the thin layer of plaster in a bloody tangle. They hit the roof of the porch, then bounced off and fell the rest of the way to the cold, wet ground below. Jack landed on the bottom, and the force of the fall knocked the wind out of his lungs. She was on top of him in an instant, his knife in her hand, putting it under his chin–

And then she was on fire.

The sun shone weakly through the bare trees of the forest, glittering in between their wet black trunks, staining the clouds a ragged pink. Jack flipped onto his stomach and frantically pulled himself along the ground, the injured leg trailing behind, until he was safely away from the pillar of flame that enveloped the blood-drinker, burning hot enough to stifle her screams after no more than two seconds. The immolation radiated enough heat to scorch the dry winter grass black and blaze against his cheeks. She flopped helplessly for a few moments before she went still. Within two minutes, she was an ashy skeleton.

Jack raised a hand to the back of his head. It came away wet with blood. He looked at the blood soaking his thigh and cursed before everything went black.

"Claire, honey... Charlie only allowed you to see a part of who he is."

Jack shifted, licking his dry lips.

"Mom, I just... I believed that he was the man that I saw. You know, good, sweet, kind, romantic. But I guess I was just so desperate for a boyfriend that I didn't see that he was just lying to me."

This was another dream. He could see the two women, mother and daughter, having a heart-to-heart in the kitchen. The kind of conversation he wouldn't have dared have with his own mother, once he learned she'd use any weakness to her advantage, even if the vulnerable one was her own son.

"No, you are not desperate!" the mother said, the images dripping hazily through Jack's mind in a half-dream place. *"You trusted him!"*

Now the girl had tears in her eyes. *"Mom, you know desperate is my thing. It's what I do. I crush on a guy, I get obsessed; it's what I did with Tripp, it's what I do with Theo. Even though I knew they loved Ciara more than me, that they had just settled for me, I still wanted them so bad. But with Charlie, it was... it was different. It was so different. I felt like the one, Mom, for the first time in my life."*

Mom was teary now. *"Honey, I know you did."*

"And now... what if it was just a lie? And I'm the pathetic idiot who fell for it?"

The dream slid apart at the edges, unraveling, when the dialog was interrupted by a smoky cough. Jack opened his eyes for real this time, his sluggish brain distinguishing his mind's eye and those that showed him the real world. He groaned, shutting them immediately and lifting a hand to his pounding head.

"Well, right now you're being held because Ava Vitali alleged that you knocked her out and held her against her will." There was a TV on somewhere; that's what he'd been listening to. It had the bad sound quality and melodramatic music of a soap opera.

Another actor spoke. *"Huh. My lawyer said that Ava also said that I stabbed Tripp to death in front of her. And then his father took his body and buried him? Which obviously didn't happen, so I would think that anything that woman says about me isn't really reliable, now, is it?"* The dramatic music swelled before the show cut to a commercial for laundry detergent.

It took a minute, but at last, Jack was able to keep his eyes open. Blinking furiously, he rubbed them clear, propping himself up on one elbow. He was lying on a bare mattress in a small bedroom. The walls were covered with faux wood paneling, bubbled and warped with age. Faded pictures hung in dusty frames – Jesus, George W. Bush, a memorial plaque with the American flag interposed over the Twin Towers claiming WE WILL NEVER FORGET, and a cross-stitch version of the Serenity Prayer.

Duncan Vizla sat in an armchair at his bedside, smoking, watching grainy images on the old tube-style television that struggled to pick up the local broadcast. His rifle was leaned up next to the wall within arm's reach, and he had his coat off. Jack found it draped over his own body, the wool saturated with smoke and old-man deodorant and the copper-rot of dried blood. For some reason, Jack wanted to bury his nose in it and breathe deeply.

"What happened?" he muttered through his dry mouth. Vizla, eyes still on the screen, handed him a plastic bottle of water. Jack eased himself up against the musty couch cushion he'd been given for a pillow, and uncapped it, drinking greedily. When he'd drained it, he set it on the bedside table beneath the softly glowing lamp, its shade fuzzy with dust. "Where are we?" he tried.

"Ssh." Duncan nodded towards the TV, where Jack could just make out a man and a woman talking.

"I've really dragged you into something, haven't I?" the woman asked.

The man chuckled. *"You have no idea."*

“Look, I know that you're worried that the mob's gonna retaliate because you're gonna put a stop to their laundering operations, but I think that if we can come up with enough stuff to help protect Philip, then we can just turn that over to the police, and we'll be safe.”

“Yeah, I-I agree with you. It's never a good idea to cross the mob, but that's not the trouble I'm talking about.”

The woman was aghast. *“What does that mean?”*

“Kristen saw a picture of you and I in the newspaper... kissing on New Year's Eve. And she gave me hell about it.” The dramatic music loomed in again on the scene before the show switched to another set of characters. Duncan grunted, the sound somehow saying *uh oh, they’re in trouble now.*

Jack shifted, moving Duncan’s coat down his bare chest. The inside was lined with some kind of silky material, which felt nice on his skin. His exposed skin. Jack lifted the coat and glanced down at himself. He was naked, except for the bandage around his thigh where he’d been stabbed. The leg was sore, and moving wasn’t pleasant, but he could tell he’d already done a significant amount of healing, thanks to the Daylight serum. Reaching back, he felt the lump on the back of his head, and a couple of stitches in his scalp.

His cheeks burned hotter than when the vampire had combusted in the sunlight right next to him. Vizla had taken off Jack’s clothes, washed him up, tended his wounds, and tucked him under the coat. “Where are my pants?” he demanded.

“Ssh,” was the reply.

“Me? Laundering mob money for Ava Vitali? Why would I do that?” another actor demanded hotly, his cheesy performance further marred by the static that cut in.

“Vizla!”

“ *Shh* ,” was the response.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Jack groaned, leaning back on the pillow. Duncan handed him another bottle of water, eyes not leaving the screen. Jack sipped on it until the show ended at last.

“Like sands through the hourglass, so are the Days of our Lives…”

Duncan hit the mute button on the remote and got out of the armchair. He lifted the coat. Jack yelped, gripping it to keep it over his waist. Duncan allowed this, apparently wanting to check the bandage. He nodded as if satisfied, then handed Jack a bottle of pills. “Take two, see how you feel.”

Jack fumbled the bottle open and swallowed two pills, chasing them with water, then set both aside. “Where are we?”

“Trailer I found. Twenty kilometers south in the woods, give or take. Walked through a stream or two. They can’t track us.” As if to be sure, Vizla went to the window and pushed

the tattered curtain aside, glancing through at the gray afternoon. Well, maybe it was afternoon, Jack didn't know. The place was dusty enough that nobody probably lived here, or they only used it for hunting or cooking meth or something. The windows were coated with it.

"She got the drop on you." Duncan turned and looked at him now, combing his fingers along his mustache for a moment.

"Who, the bloodsucker? No," Jack lied. "She was the oldest, the one making the fledglings."

"Still. One vampire. Threw you out a window."

"I threw *us* out the window," Jack corrected. "Where the fuck are my pants?"

"Had to cut them off."

"Oh, for fuck's…" Jack rubbed his face, then ran a hand through his hair. It was soft and clean, like it had been washed and brushed.

"We'll stay here tonight. You should be good to walk tomorrow." Jack watched Duncan sit on the other side of the bed, the old mattress creaking miserably as he settled his bulk and lit a cigarette. "Didn't watch your corners," he muttered around the butt. "Did you?"

"Yes, I did," Jack insisted.

Duncan turned and looked at him, smoke curling up past his lighter-toned eye.

"I was going to. I looked, but it was…" Jack trailed off, hating himself for the way his lip wanted to tremble. "I didn't look," he admitted at last. "Just in that one room, though."

"When it mattered the most."

Jack sighed, rolling his eyes and leaning back on the cushion. "Yeah. Bet you can't wait to tell Crawford, huh? Oh, and don't forget to tell Will so he can give me shit about it, too."

"Lucky to be alive," Duncan told him, ashing right on the puke-green carpet. "Less than an inch from your femoral."

"Fuck." Jack rubbed his face again.

"You're not cut out for this."

"Fuck you, Vizla."

Just like that, the Black Kaiser was on him, knees on either side of his hips, thick, dangerous hands around his neck, cigarette dangling precariously from his mouth. His silvery hair hung down over his forehead and his vampire eye blazed, the iris flooding red. "You're gonna get yourself killed," he rasped.

"So what?" Jack shouted up at him, latching his hands over his wrists. "So fucking what?"

Vizla just stared at him. He took a drag from his cigarette without touching it, smoke curling from his nostrils like an ancient dragon. Then, "You let everyone use you."

Jack's lip curled and he scoffed, a flippant little sound.

The hands around his neck tightened. "Your mom. That bitch in Paris. Crawford."

"You work for Daylight, too!" Jack shot back, pulling uselessly at his wrists.

"You know why."

Jack did know why. It was the only way to get a shot at Blut.

"And you love it," Duncan added. "Can't help yourself. Could've drugged that kid any time, but you didn't."

"It works better if you're already trying to sleep – all I had was his mom's medicine cabinet to work with, it's not like I brought it with me–"

Duncan's hand left his throat and pressed over his mouth, silencing him. The TV flickered soundlessly in the background. Then he slowly drew it away and got off the bed, ashing his cigarette and sinking back into the chair. He stared at the grainy soap opera, but didn't turn the volume back on, smoking in silence.

Jack pulled himself more upright, his leg wound aching where Duncan had jostled it. They shared a long, furious silence. At last, Jack broke it. He knew Duncan would wait him out – he'd gone days without saying a word before, something Jack would never be able to do. "It's a give and take," he said quietly, pulling the Kaiser's coat closer around himself. "That way it's not… a con."

Duncan grunted, acknowledging that he'd heard, at least.

"With Sarah… yeah, she supported me. Gave me a place to live. And I gave her… what she needed. I earned my place. It's not like what my mom used to do – lie and lie and take the money and run."

Duncan exhaled smoke.

"Daylight, well… I mean, who wouldn't jump at the chance for superpowers?" Jack shrugged. "I get to travel. Work with *great people."* Ah, he'd seen the Kaiser's lip twitch under his mustache. Maybe it was a smile. "I like it, especially when we're back home training. I have my own room, a roof over my head, and… I like it. I like them. I like Crawford and Bella and… Jimmy and Bev and Zeller, they're my friends. So I don't mind risking my life to kill vampires." He sighed, running a hand through his curls. "And Jacob, well… he needed help, and even though I conned him, he got something out of it."

"You sucking his cock," Duncan rumbled.

"Yeah."

“Saving him wasn’t enough?”

Jack considered. He rubbed his eyes. “I don’t know. I mean, he had a rough night. And I needed him to sleep.”

“Could’ve just drugged him. Tucked him in.”

Jack glanced at him, a wary eyebrow climbing. “That’s what bothers you. More than anything else. The sex.”

Vizla got up then, and Jack had a moment of panic as he obliterated his cigarette butt against the back of the armchair and tossed it aside. “I stitched you up,” he said, a smoky growl. “Think you owe me something?”

“I assume Crawford would be pretty pissed off if you let me die,” Jack scoffed, raising his chin, defiance springing through his innate fear of this man who assassinated hundreds of humans even before becoming Daylight’s most capable killing machine.

“Nobody knows what happened. I could tell them you got *yourself* killed. Almost the truth.”

An icy rime of frost bloomed against Jack’s skin and he shivered under the coat. Normally, he was a quick thinker – lightning fast, even. But now his mind felt glacier-slow. All he could do was watch as Duncan sat on the edge of the bed, next to him this time, angling to look at him, filling Jack’s nostrils with his unmistakable scent. “Maybe people should take care of you because *they should take care of you* .”

Jack’s protest bubbled up against the back of his throat. *What’s that supposed to mean? Nothing in the world is free – that’s how everything works. You have to be realistic. No such thing as a free lunch.*

But he couldn’t make the words come. Instead, he found himself dangerously close to crying, his bottom lip trembling, eyes misty.

Duncan got up, and Jack thought he’d go back to the chair and the TV, but he didn’t. Instead, he went to the other side of the creaky old bed and took off his boots, then settled back on the headboard, stretching out his long legs. He looked at Jack and made a small gesture with his hand, curling the blunt fingers toward himself.

Jack didn’t hesitate. He slid closer and melded against Duncan’s side, tucked under his arm, face pressed against the rough fibers of his sweater. Smoke and Speed Stick and something fatherly he couldn’t put his finger on. He slid his arm around the Kaiser’s stomach, the rounded belly and little love handles that somehow sat over granite-hard muscle and unbreakable bones all threaded through with preternatural strength. *Daddy* popped into his head, but he pushed it away like a leaf on the surface of a pool.

“This okay?”

Jack nodded quickly against his chest and Duncan shifted him a little closer, adjusting the coat so it covered more of his leg.

“Sometimes people do things for you and they don’t want anything back,” Vizla told him, a blunt instruction.

“Well, it’s just–”

“Shh.”

Jack shut his mouth.

“Sometimes the helping is the part they wanted, not to be given something in return.”

“Altruism is a myth,” Jack argued, though softly.

“No, it’s not,” was the blunt reply that welcomed no further argument. “I helped you and don’t want anything back. That’s the problem with young people.”

“What is?”

“All or nothing. Either everyone wants something back, or nobody does. Depends on the person. Depends on the situation. When I retired – I wanted my money. Put my time in. Should get my pension. But I stitched you up.” He rubbed Jack’s bare shoulder for a moment, his hand rough but warm. “Don’t want anything back. Get it?”

Jack didn’t answer right away. He was deeply distracted by that deadly hand stroking his skin like he was a lap cat or a little kid being lulled to sleep.

“You hear me?”

“Yeah, I heard you.”

“You believe me?”

Jack shrugged.

“Want me to prove it again?”

Jack pulled away enough to look up at him. The Black Kaiser looked down at him. Jack imagined this was the last thing many people and vampires had seen – Duncan looking down at them, the light casting shadows under his cheekbones, bringing up the silvery bits of his hair and stubble, the gray threads of his mustache. “Prove it?”

“You were asleep last time. Maybe you need to be awake.”

“Uhm, okay.”

“Lay down, then.”

Jack did as he was told, tucking the cushion behind his head. He figured Vizla was going to change the bandage on his leg or administer some other kind of medical attention, but the

way he slowly drifted the coat off of Jack's body, the silk sliding over his bare skin, seemed…

"Does it hurt?" Duncan knelt down at his feet and slowly eased them both up flat on the mattress.

"Just a little pull." Jack could feel the taut new scar tissue that had already webbed together thanks to Bev's serum. The sensation just barely breached the rush of mortification at being naked like this, even though Duncan had apparently already seen everything. "Kinda sore," he added.

The Kaiser hummed, edging closer and easing Jack's knees apart. "Now?"

Jack shook his head, a heated flush climbing up his cheeks. It turned into an inferno when Duncan leaned in and lifted his injured leg, hanging it delicately over his arm. "Now?"

"Fine," Jack breathed, praying Duncan wasn't looking directly at his cock, which was twitching a little, shifting on its own. That small response became a pool of anticipation that drained directly between his legs when Duncan leaned in and kissed his knee below the bandage, the bristly touch of his mustache making Jack's heart sizzle across the pan in his chest.

Duncan lifted Jack's injured leg up and over his shoulder as he leaned in, stretching out on the bed on his stomach and elbows. Jack was unable to move or think, but his body had his back, flooding itself with heat and want as the fearsome assassin kissed above the bandage now, then pressed another against his inner thigh. Jack's skin twitched as the mustache tickled it.

Duncan spread a hand over Jack's flat stomach, stroking it as he leaned in and breathed on Jack's growing erection. Breathing was difficult on Jack's end all of the sudden, and he found himself studying the scars that riddled the back of Vizla's hand, the nicotine stains between his first two fingers, its sharp contrast to the smooth skin of his stomach. "Not into boys, mostly," Duncan explained, even as he nuzzled his grizzled face between Jack's legs. "But you're pretty enough."

Jack scoffed out a, " *Pretty* ?" that melted into a staggered gasp when Vizla opened up and swallowed his cock to the root, leaning on one elbow and using the other hand to stroke and grope Jack's stomach and thigh, curling around his hip and finding the bow of his back. And for not being "into boys," Duncan had apparently had his dick sucked enough times to know how to give *incredible* head. He had no hesitation. There was nothing halting or delicate, no shred of reluctance, no inkling that this was a *job* of any kind.

Duncan stopped suddenly, letting Jack's cock slip between his lips but catching it in his dangerous hand. Jack whimpered as the cooler air touched it, then made a similarly unhinged sound when Duncan worked it through his fist for a moment, looking at it with warm eyes, even the vampire one emoting a kind of sweet regard. "Pretty," he said again, thumbing the slit. Jack knew he wasn't huge by any means, but had always felt above average, and nobody had any complaints. His cock was symmetrical and porn-perfect, if he did say so himself. But in Duncan's fist it looked almost delicate.

The Kaiser lifted him out of the way and nudged Jack's legs further apart, then balled up his coat and stuffed it under Jack's hips to raise them a bit. Never in his life, in this universe, did Jack Ganzer think he was going to get his ass eaten by Duncan Vizla, but the planets had somehow aligned, and the mustached hitman was between his legs, devouring his hole with the same determination that he sucked cock. Jack gasped, arched his back, his hands gripping the bare mattress, nails scratching over the synthetic silky fabric, finding the grooves of the teal floral design.

Tensing his leg hurt, but he didn't care. Duncan's tongue was big and wet and heavy and greedy, rimming him without a moment's rest, licking and teasing and devouring this most shameful of places on the human body, swirling a cyclone of satisfaction that made Jack's cock ache and pulse. He was vaguely aware of Duncan unbuckling his own belt and reaching into his pants, but it in no way disrupted his mission, which was, apparently, to assassinate Jack in a different way, killed with kindness.

Duncan pushed his pants down enough to rub his cock on the mattress as he worked, especially when both of his hands were busy, or to pump it through his free fist while he ate Jack out with the same enthusiasm, he assumed, as going after a woman's pleasure.

When he came, Duncan buried his face against Jack's cleft and groaned into it. Still twitching from his release, he gripped Jack by the hip and went back to sucking him off, his lips swollen and shiny and his stubble wet with his own saliva. He looked up at Jack with his two-toned eyes, eyes that Jack had once thought were dead and sharklike and would never change. Now they adored, swooned, even.

Jack threw his head back when his orgasm burst through its cage door and ran rampant through his body, a zoo predator finally free. As it faded, he collapsed in a limp pile of limbs, a mindless collection of bones and blood and skin.

Somehow, he was back in Duncan's arms, head on his chest, listening to the quickened pace of his heart and his breathing as it slowed over time.

"Good boy," came the smoky whisper.

"Thank you," Jack murmured reflexively as Vizla tucked the coat around his damp, naked body.

"Didn't do it for a thank you."

"Just proving altruism exists?"

"Go to sleep," was Duncan's grunted response.

"Yes, Daddy," Jack whispered, and obeyed.

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